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Demon Lord, Retry!

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VISIT...

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DEMON
LORD,
RETRY!

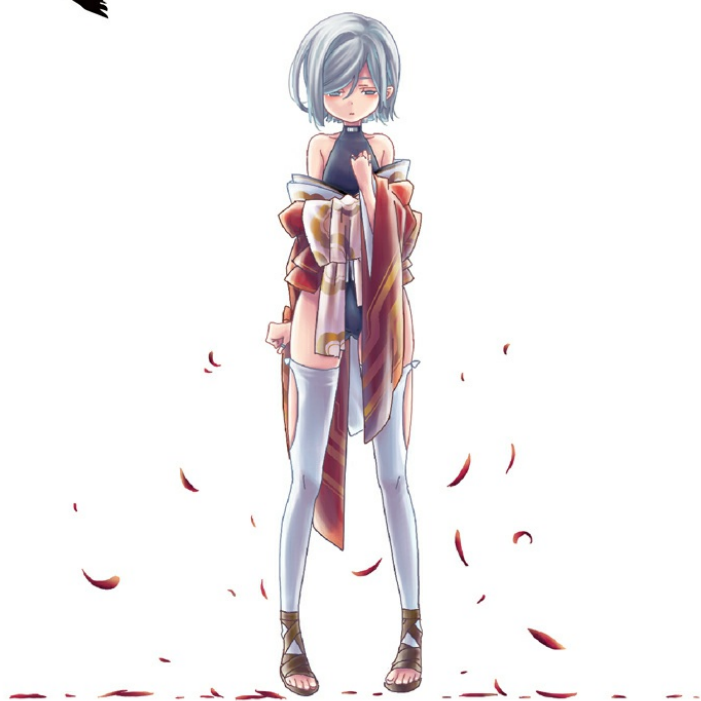






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Intermission: “Birthday”

—XX/XX/2006

“Happy birthday to you...” XX’s androgynous voice was scratching its way out of Akira’s headphones.

XX’s singing was totally off-pitch — almost unbearable. Recently, Akira and XX had been communicating via voice chat as well as text. While voice chatting is a cornerstone of online co-op nowadays, it wasn’t a mainstream feature back then.

“Happy birthday, dear Akira... Now you’re practically thir-ty!”

“Shut up! Get a job, you moron. Heard of a recruitment center?”

“Hey! That’s not chat-appropriate language!”

“Go work like a dog. Be a corporate pawn. Grind the rest of your life away as nothing but a replaceable cog in the machine of society.”

“Ow! Ow! My ears!” The content of their conversation was the same as usual, except that both Akira and XX were audibly intoxicated. “Meanie. Here I am, spending time with poor lonesome Akira who’s all alone on his birthday and forever.”

“Whatever. I can’t be bothered to go outside.”

“Wait, what about that girl? You two are over, already?”

“Since, like, a while ago. We both just wanted something easy. ’Course it wouldn’t last.” Akira poured more whiskey into his glass. The ice cubes clinked. “I’ll find someone again. Won’t take long, anyway.”

Akira went through glass after glass of whiskey. XX could tell how fast he was downing them just from his audio.

2006 was the year when Akira Ono had hit rock bottom. He hit up girls online and IRL nonstop, always keeping at least a dozen women at his beck and call. Some called him a player, and others called him a manipulative man-whore. His

old fearlessly confident demeanor was nowhere to be found. His days were filled with depravity, as if he were slowly drowning. The black hole had devoured everything, leaving nothing but a pile of rubble in its wake, and the internet had become a wasteland, as far as the eye could see. Akira Ono had earned some free time in exchange for being forced to shut down the Game. His debauchery was getting worse by the day, and anyone would have deemed him hopeless. Outside of work, he spent all of his time on booze and women. Time felt like a repetitious spiral, utterly devoid of productivity.

“You’re kind of a douchebag when you don’t have anything to be creative about, Akira. Like a piece of human garbage. Worthless like cockroach dung, or space debris!”

“Shut the hell up and get a job. Pay your taxes. You think you’re on some year-round summer break?”

“I can’t! Really! I just found this out. I’m sick. What’s it called...? Right, ‘narcolepsy.’”

“...The one where you can’t stay awake? Why’ve I never heard of it? When does it hit you, anyway?”

“Every time I try to find a job, I just get so tired. I’m a total narco.”

“...I bet a punch in the face would make you pretty narco, too.”

The clinking of ice cubes could be heard from Akira’s end, and the opening of a beer can from XX’s. Both of them had lost count of how much they had to drink.

“Why don’t you take that job you were talking about? Then you can make an even better world.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do now? I lost everything.”

“...Your old pal XXX might come back.”

“Who gives a crap! If there’s anything I hate, it’s traitors! He just spewed a bunch of bullshit and disappeared... Good riddance!”

“Sounds like you’re having another tough day... You’re still cute when you’re frustrated, Akira!”

“Bleh... I’m turning off voice chat.”

“Woah, wait! Wait! One last thing!”

“Huh?”

“...I’ll be waiting. No matter how long it takes.”

His vision blurry from the alcohol, Akira disconnected without a reply, and fell onto his bed. Having had a few too many, a particular song kept refraining in his head.

Happy birthday to you...

“No matter how long? I don’t even know the next time I’ll talk to... Wait...”

(How old was XX? Was XX a dude or a chick? What was... their name?) “Heh. How drunk am I...? Let’s hit the sack.” Akira mumbled to himself and closed his eyes.

It would take quite some time until this man would truly awaken...

Chapter Six: Prelude to Turmoil

—The port of Euritheis.

Many were hard at work at the docks, most loading cargo onto ships. The types of cargo varied widely: loads of fresh water, food, trade goods, and so on. Some ships even carried livestock, like pigs and sheep, in addition to fresh vegetables and meat, so they could milk and butcher them during the journey.

“Hurry up and get these up there, old man!”

“S-Sorry!”

A middle-aged man was wobbling to and fro amidst the crowd of workers. He was Hummer, a porter from the city of Rookie. He was undoubtedly at the bottom of the social class system, and lived in the slums. Today, he had come to Euritheis for a temporary job.

“Old man! You think you can work the docks, wobblin’ around like that?”

“I-I’m sorry...!” Hummer shrunk his neck into his shoulders, having been scolded by the boatswain. Marlin the boatswain was a rough and rugged man in his twenties. He had been shouting at his crew left and right, and quickly resorted to violence against anyone who worked slower than his acceptable pace. Hummer, a man in his late forties, was nearly brought to tears from being berated by a man young enough to be his son.

“Shut your mouth and move those legs!” Marlin ruthlessly kicked Hummer in his portly gut.

“Y-Yes, sir...!” His face twisted in pain, but Hummer continued loading the ship.

Many men of the sea were of a rugged nature, and Marlin was no exception. They lived their lives sailing in the most powerful force of nature. All of them knew from experience that no status or title would save them from a storm. They saw people in a binary of useful or not; one useless crew member could jeopardize the entire ship.

“Eef...” Hummer carried those boxes with all of his strength, wobbling and panting.

He could see that some of the other workers carried the same boxes with ease as they chatted with each other, while others had reddened faces like him. Experience made all the difference. It wasn't easy for a newcomer to work on these unstable docks and ships. While Hummer would have to spend a long time allowing his muscles to learn how to walk here, it would not be an easy skill to master.

Hummer crossed the trap and made it onto the ship to find the captain checking off the loaded cargo and giving out detailed orders. A deep scar ran over his right eye, which was covered by an eye patch. His arms were as thick as logs, his immense pectorals were pushing against his shirt, and his jaw was covered with a full beard.

(H-He's a true man of the sea...)

Hummer felt dizzy looking at the captain. There were plenty of fresh adventurers back in Rookie who dressed like they were entering a fashion contest. Beneath their dressed-up outfits, none of them had the substance to prove themselves worthy. On the other hand, this captain had no need to decorate himself. His mere presence was all he needed to garner attention and respect.

“Newbie. That box goes in storage C-3. Don't put it anywhere else.”

“Ay-Aye!”

“That one goes to the stern...” The captain continued to order one worker after another, checking the branding on the box.

Hummer was surprised to find that each box had a designated spot. He carried his box to the correct storage compartment and saw the numerous boxes already stacked up in the other compartments. Each compartment was rather small and divided by a wooden wall. They also seemed to be water-and shockproof.

“This is what a ship is like... It carries all of this stuff, far far away...” Hummer couldn't help but find some childish wonder in his first encounter with a ship

and his first job at sea. Even his muscles seemed to refresh as he took in his surroundings.

“O-Okay... It’s almost lunch. I can do this...!”

His feet were unsteady on the docks, but Hummer safely made it to lunch with only the occasional scolding.

“Herf... Huff...” Hummer panted, sprawled out on the floor.

“...Drink this.”

“Aye!?”

“Didn’t think you’d last ’til lunch.” The captain, his face as intimidating as before, handed him a wooden tankard full of water.

“Th-Thank you...!” Hummer practically embraced the tankard and started chugging from it. The water was lukewarm, but it still quenched Hummer’s scorching throat, especially with the lavish touch of a lemon slice.

“Eat.”

“Ay-Aye!” Hummer timidly accepted two dishes from the captain. The first plate contained sautéed pork, lettuce, and bread, while the other had two fish, grilled whole. For someone like Hummer, who lived in the slums, this was an extravagant feast, to say the least.

“Y-You’re sure I can have all this...?”

“Ain’t much to eat out in the sea. So we all drink and eat the best we can while we’re on land.”

“I-I see...”

“Hardtacks only get tougher, and the maggots will get ’em before long. If our water turns sour, we’ll get the runs. The salted meat in those barrels will stink worse by the day until we can’t eat ’em. Won’t take us long to go through those greens, either. Towards the end, we’d peel the leather off of our boots.”

As the captain plainly explained, color drained from Hummer’s face. It felt like a bucket of cold water to snap him out of the excitement he was feeling about setting foot on a ship for the first time.

Unbothered by Hummer's reaction, the captain tossed back a gulp from his bottle of rum and lit a cigar with a Spell Stone. "We could drift away to anywhere in the world, but when our Water Spell Stones run out, all we can do is pray to the Angel for a little bit of rain."

Just listening to the captain talk seemed to rob the food on Hummer's plates of its taste. Was he being toyed with again? Hummer stiffened.

"For your sake, you should stay on land for good," the captain added.

"U-Um... I..." Hummer's expression darkened.

"We only turn to the sea because we have nowhere else to go on land. It's a dump for those who can't live among the rest of society."

Hummer stared at the ground, unable to respond. Was he concerned for him? Or was he firing him since he was obviously not cut out for the work?

"I-I... messed up in a dungeon... I became a porter, but things didn't turn out like I..." Hummer explained how he tried all sorts of work, only to be labeled as useless and fired each time. One might think that such a confession would only worsen Hummer's chances of keeping the job, but he was an honest man, for better or worse. "I-I'll work as hard as I can. Please don't let me go...!"

In short, Hummer had lived a boring half-life riddled with failure. No ups and no downs. Just an unbearably miserable life story. He was a helpless sap who had no choice but to stick to being a porter even as he was robbed and beaten by those young enough to be his children.

The captain patiently listened to Hummer's uninteresting story of his life. The captain's stoic expression never budged, his eyes always cast out to the sea.

"Do you know what these ships..."

"Captain?"

"Do you know what that cargo... No, I guess it doesn't concern you." The captain left without saying another word.

Relieved that he wasn't fired, Hummer turned to the sea. The waves endlessly rolled into the docks, rocking the ships in an uncomfortable sway. A figure appeared by Hummer, who had been absent-mindedly gazing out at the blue.

“*Tsk...* You’re here, for real? How long does it take you to eat?” Merlin was looking down at Hummer with an irritated look on his face.

“I-I’m sorry, sir!”

“This ship ain’t your dinner table.”

Hummer began scarfing down his food, but he struggled to swallow it all at once.

Marlin slugged Hummer square on the head. “I said eat, so you better finish that in ten seconds. You screw up out in the ocean and I’ll toss you overboard.” His cold eyes glared down at Hummer.

“Ay-Aye...!” Hummer choked down the rest of his food.

He knew that Marlin meant every word.

“What the hell does the captain want with this dim-witted geezer...!?” Marlin spat out and left in the same direction that the captain had gone, apparently ready to start an argument.

Hummer could only watch with a pained expression as Marlin walked away.

——Honored Guest Quarters, Flagship.

The honored guest quarters were decorated with furniture and amenities reminiscent of a five-star hotel. This special guest room contained a canopied bed, ruby-red carpeting, and a liquor cabinet complete with spirits from around the world, all illuminated by lights that used plenty of Spell Stones. Outside the door of this room, the shipmates had no place to sleep but the bare boards of the deck or a few dark corners below deck. Still, this room was occupied by the bishop alone.

The commander was utterly shocked by the bishop’s unexpected command. “Bring the demi-human to Suneo...?”

“Yes. Jack likes to play rough with his toys. Despite looking like a simpleton, he can be quite persistent.” The bishop gave an amused laugh as he scooped a glob of honey from a jar and licked it off.

This was a surprise to the commander, who was under the assumption that

they were headed straight to Hellion territory.

“Ar-Aren’t we taking the demi-human to Hellion territory...?”

“Your ignorance never ceases to amaze me. We aren’t dealing with humans.”

“Y-Yes, that’s true...”

This time, they had made a deal with a Hellion... One with the title of Grand Devil, no less.

“Take everything you think you know and toss it overboard. Hand over all of our cards and we may never make it out of their territory alive.”

“So wh-what do we do...?”

The bishop sighed at the commander’s obliviousness. If the bishop wanted him to be of any use, he would have to show him the ropes, and from the ground up.

“The demi-human is our insurance policy. We must hold onto their most desired chip until the very end of the game.”

“I-I see... This will be a deal in two stages.”

The bishop confirmed that answer as he sliced a block of crisp, white cheese. Even this block of cheese, made from milk of the Northern Grasslands mules, was a delicacy worth more than a gold coin.

“Mm. Exquisite.” The bishop licked his lips. The cheese was exquisite indeed, with a gentle texture and a hint of sweet nuts. As the commander gulped in envy, the bishop cut one piece of cheese after another from the block and tossed it into his mouth. “When dealing with *them*... failure is not an option,” he concluded, with a proud grin soaked in avarice.

In summary, the deal was for them to deliver the heretics to the devil in exchange for rare monster parts, minerals or magical items unobtainable to most humans, and some extremely dangerous drugs. That being said, if they made the mistake of handing over all of their cargo at once, there would be nothing to stop the devil from going back on the deal then and there. It was too easy to imagine that the devil would kill them all without hesitation as soon as he had what he wanted.

“Wait for me in Suneo,” the bishop ordered.

“Yes, bishop! Absolutely!”

The commander was secretly relieved that he wouldn't have to set foot in Hellion territory. If he had any say in it, he would never go near the place as long as he lived.

The fleet of ships carrying the droves of slaves left Euritheis to deliver the demi-human to Suneo, where all sorts of characters would converge, unbeknownst to each participating party.

—On the deck of one of the ships.

“W-Wow...!”

Hummer couldn't help but shout in amazement as he watched the fleet plow through the crashing waves with masculine magnificence. Of course, he had no idea where the fleet was headed. Most shipmates didn't, in fact. None of that information was shared outside of the captain and a few select posts, which was nothing out of the ordinary in the seafaring world. This was partially because most of the crew was illiterate, and wouldn't know what to do with such information anyway. Many simply did as they were told, like cattle that knew how to curse.

Even the fresh crew member who had been excited at the fleet's departure began to suffer seasickness as the journey continued. Their footing was always unstable, to the point where the inexperienced could barely walk. Many of the first-timers began vomiting over the rails, and the seasoned crew got a good laugh at their expense. This had become routine, a sort of rite of passage.

“We're barely offshore, newbies!”

“It's going to be a long sail for you wimps.”

The laughing sailors had gone through the same experience on their maiden voyage, but any workplace had its share of people with inferiority complexes. Picking on newbies was their favorite pastime, especially since there wasn't much to do out at sea.

As the seasoned sailors mocked the newbies, Marlin was observing the deck from the crow's nest.

(Another ship full of duds...)

The sea route to Hellion territory passed through rough waters, which made it ideal for training new recruits. The experienced crew sped around the deck, expertly manipulating the sail so the ship could zig-zag through the headwind. To the newbies, their technique was practically magical. As the first-time sailors desperately tried to contribute, many could do no more than trip over the rocking deck and roll down it like barrels.

(There they go again. I guess Cap's getting old *and* soft...)

Marlin had turned away many of the candidates after watching them fail at loading the ship, but the captain had insisted on some of them making it onto the voyage, one of them being Hummer. Marlin hardly expected the visibly overweight and older-than-most newcomer to make any contribution on the deck.

(Now, where'd that old man roll off to...?)

Marlin spotted Hummer. He was not barreling down the deck, but standing on his feet. Amidst the chaos of the ship, he was faltering, but surely making his way around. He comforted his seasick crewmates and stowed the likes of barrels, rope, and fishing equipment that kept coming loose from the rocking of the ship.

(Huh...)

Hummer was in no way efficient or graceful in his movement, but somehow persistent. Ships in this world were nowhere near as stable as modern-day seafaring vessels. For the most part, their fate was left up to the wind and tide, like the ships of the New World era on Earth. These ships had no bilge-keels or fin stabilizers to ease the rocking. In that sense, they were more like a piece of driftwood than anything else.

(That old man...)

Marlin saw Hummer in a different light, watching him put up a good fight on deck, much to his surprise. Marlin had seen many 'outlaw' types, who had been

bragging and boasting while the ship was docked, drain their tears and toss their stomach contents overboard once they were out at sea. Every one of them had begged for the ship to turn around and drop them off on solid ground, vomit and snot trailing down their faces. Each time they did, Marlin had a good laugh and threw overboard any of them that refused to adapt. There was no way that a ship could reverse its course for them.

(Does he just not get seasick...?)

Some men were immune to seasickness right off the bat. Marlin was the one of them.

“Won’t hurt to keep an eye on him for... Huh? Oh, the usual.” Marlin cracked a grin, having spotted a small fleet headed their way. With the wave of a flag, Marlin notified the other ships in their fleet. Immediately, the ships in the fleet began moving on the water like limbs of a single organism. These parts of the sea were burdened by small bands of pirates that preyed on the occasional cargo ships. “Those morons. Who do they think we are?”

At Marlin’s call, the veteran sailors lined the edge of the ship, weapons in hand, to intimidate the pirates. Meanwhile, they brought out lances and bows from the armory and stationed them on the deck.

Seeing that the fleet was headed their way, the small pirate fleet dispersed and began to flee. The pirates had surely realized that they were outmatched in firepower as well as guts. This particular cargo fleet would rob any pirates who attacked them, pillaging their ships, weapons, cargo, crew, anything they could sell. Just as on land, the sea was rife with lawlessness, making any voyage far from safe.

“Onward! Show those cocky bastards who they’re dealing with!” Marlin boomed from the nest, commanding the fleet to head into the band of pirates.

Hummer stood on the deck, blue in the face and shaking as he was suddenly plunged into battle. His long and arduous voyage had only just begun.

Infiltration

Four silhouettes were dashing through the pitch-black night. While there was

barely enough light for them to see even a couple of yards ahead, their steps were confident and sure, perhaps owing to nocturnal vision or some sort of special skill. Upon closer inspection, they were an endlessly curious party... The Demon Lord in his long black coat, his newly-summoned advisor, Akane Fujisaki, and the internationally-renowned Star Players Mynk and Olgan. If they were all mixed in a beaker together, they might have caused some catastrophic chemical reaction.

“Hey, Olgan... Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes.”

Olgan was as expressionless as always, but Mynk was visibly nervous. Anyone would have been as unnerved as she was if they were headed for Hellion territory with such a small party.



“Just between us, what are you trying to accomplish? Suicide?”

“No. Assassination.” Olgan sharply countered Mynk, and turned to the other two of their party. Her eyes fell on the very man that gave this mission a semblance of hope — the historical rebel out of ancient song, an existence beyond human comprehension, an existence called ‘Lucifer the Fallen Angel’ by some and ‘the Demon Lord’ by others. This living embodiment of mythology carried a teenage girl in his arms.

“Good morning, Akane. Now you can carry yourself.”

“Wha? You’re the one that took advantage of me in my sleep, Hakuto! Now be a man and carry me aaalllll the waaaaay!”

Dropping Akane, the Demon Lord kept running without turning back. Not a tinge of guilt could be seen in his expression, which resembled that of someone who had just wheeled a week’s worth of trash to the curb for pick-up.

“Hey! Don’t litter me! I’m too cute for that!”

The rest of the group had also left Akane in the dirt, but the girl caught up to the Demon Lord in no time. Considering how fast the entire party was going, her speed was incredible.

“You got legs. Use them.”

“Not exactly in my superstar morning routine, Hakuto... This is your problem, you know.”

“What’s my problem?”

“You just don’t *get* girls...!” Akane leapt onto the Demon Lord’s back, clinging onto him. Perhaps she was just too lazy to run. “Phew. This is the life. Hi ho, Silveeeeeer!”

The Demon Lord palmed Akane’s face without a word and tossed her aside. His expression was still devoid of any guilt, like he had just cleaned out his closet.

Akane caught up in the blink of an eye, panting. “Litter me once, shame on you! Litter me twice, shame on... This is your problem, Hakuto!”

“Ugh...”

It was practically an instant replay. Watching the commotion behind her, Olgan’s preconceptions about the mythology of Lucifer came crashing down. She had always imagined the Fallen Angel to be solemn. The legendary rebel had resonated with her. The deity who, according to legend, came to rule half of the world: the night. In fact, her idea of Lucifer was an ideal she had strived for. She, too, was trying to rebel against the all-too-powerful Grand Devil.

Mynk also seemed disillusioned by the scene. “Are you sure he’s the legendary Demon Lord?”

“...At the very least, he’s as powerful.” Despite having witnessed the Demon Lord’s power when he halted that devastating invasion, Olgan couldn’t help but feel anxious about his demeanor. “For now, we just have to carry on.”

Mynk sighed. “What a mess you’ve roped me into.”

The party remained silent for the rest of their way out of Doyle and arrived at Fortress Arthur on the border of Animania. The area was utterly quiet, save for a small number of guards on patrol. Their lack of situational awareness was evident from the short-staffing even after the catastrophe in Rookie.

“This country never changes... They still have faith in their ‘republic,’” Mynk spat out.

Edogawa was one of the few republics on the Asian continent of Earth. While republicanism had served the nation fine during its long history without war, it was a much weaker system during emergencies. The Republic of Edogawa did not hold national elections, but chose its leader from a vast pool of aristocrats, who wouldn’t have too much power in office. During emergencies when quick decision-making could be the difference between life and death, the lack of a powerful leader would only exacerbate the casualties.

“Weaker nations perish. It’s only natural,” Olgan countered. She wholeheartedly believed in the triumph of strength and lacked any interest in political structure.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord and Akane had their own observations to make about the outdated fortress.

“What is this, a log cabin...? Any player could take this down in five minutes.”

“I could do it in thirty seconds. Bada bing bada boom.”

While their assessments were harsh, both of them exceeded the scope of possible threats in this world. Olgan explained the fortress to Akane and the Demon Lord, and that Animania lay beyond it. Once they passed the fortress, they would be in enemy territory. Human rules and preconceptions would mean nothing.

Akane’s eyes glimmered with curiosity.

“Anima...? They’re animal people, right!? I wanna see! Soft fur... Silky fur... Fluffy fur...”

“I should have asked this before...” Olgan turned to her. “Are you kin to the Demon Lord?”

“What’s that? Hakuto! They call you the Demon Lord here, too? Hilarious!”

The word ‘too’ stuck with Olgan. Akane was speaking as if there was some other world outside of this one.

“I’m Akane, the Superstar of the Sleepless Castle! Nice to meet you, fan!”

“Super...star...?”

“Guh, you’re making this complicated. Shut up,” the Demon Lord interrupted. He didn’t know what piece of information Akane would just toss out there. He lit a cigarette and jumped onto the fortress wall. He waved the rest of his party up. “Let’s do introductions before we go into enemy territory,” he said self-importantly, gazing out at the forest beyond the fortress.

A guard spotted them and began sounding an alarm, but the party was unbothered. They had nothing they wanted to do at the fortress, anyway. After some soldiers had gathered at the scene, they recognized Mynk and Olgan and left the intruders alone. The Star Players regularly came to the fortress to make deals with the Anima. Let sleeping dogs lie. In truth, they were like government workers assigned to guard the fortress.

Each member of the party introduced themselves, but Mynk wouldn’t stop there. She was an S-Rank adventurer at the top of the pyramid, so normally, she

was perfectly calm and steadfast. She had detailed knowledge about the political situations around the continent, and was very skilled in distilling information. However, she was ailed by a devastating complex, and once her ailment came to light, things got out of hand.

“Introductions, you say...” Mynk began. “What’s your end goal, Demon Lord? What are you looking to get from interrogating me?”

“No interrogation. I just thought I’d ask your names and what you’re good at...”

“Well, if you insist. If you *must* know everything about me.”

“Just your name...”

“My name is Mynk. The world knows me as a Star Player, but under that mask my true self is...” Mynk began solemnly describing herself with the most woeful expression she could muster.

While she looked cute and picturesque under the moonlight, most of the phrases she spoke were quite enigmatic. ‘Dark Phoenix,’ and ‘Shadow Salamander,’ for example. What’s worse, she occasionally grabbed her right hand and loudly whispered to herself, something like ‘It can’t be... not yet!’ This made her introduction drag on for some time. In fact, it was more of a prolonged autobiography, with more than a dash of edge and teen angst. Her story was a rollercoaster full of impactful twists and turns, even though the Demon Lord hadn’t a shred of interest in it.

He finally interrupted her, exasperated. “Are you going through your own Fandom page or something?”

“Fan... what?”

“Never mind.” *I already know too much about you*, the Demon Lord seemed to say with a shake of his head.

Coincidentally, Olgan’s head was shrinking into her shoulders at the same time. Akane was the only one who had heard Mynk out, fully intrigued.

Akane delivered the final blow. “Is this girl emo or what! Something sealed in her right hand? That’s so textbook it’s revolutionary!”

“E-mo...? What are you two talking about...?” Olgan muttered.

“Hey, that bandage is a seal too, right?”

“Oh, you can tell?” Mynk answered, exuding melancholy. “When this holy binding comes undone, the Other Me will awaken...”

“Oh, no! That’s horrible...!” Akane couldn’t keep it up any longer. She burst out laughing, rolling onto the floor. “Stop it! I can only LMAO so much!”

They certainly didn’t look like a fearless party about to cut through Animania into Hellion territory.

The Demon Lord exhaled a puff of smoke and spoke up in an attempt to put an end to the ridiculous mood. “First, we’re going to split into two groups. Just in case, we’re going to fill in this forest.”

“Fill in? What do you mean?” Olgan alone reacted to his statement.

Beside her, Mynk was striking one bizarre pose after another as Akane cheered her on. In the end, Akane started grasping her own right hand.

Mynk said things like “I-I must contain it... Just a little longer...!”

And Akane chimed in, “my right hand’s getting harder to please, like a quarter-pounder with cheese!”

(Idiot plus chuuni equals my worst nightmare, apparently...)

The Demon Lord watched the pair for a moment with distant eyes before turning to Olgan. He had decided that she was the only one who could hold a serious conversation with him.

“My basic tactic is to create a map and name different sections of any unknown areas.”

“You see the Animania forest as a dungeon...?”

While the Demon Lord was planning to do this for the sake of Quick Travel, Olgan seemed to understand his method, somehow. At the same time, she was a little impressed by how cautious the Demon Lord seemed. At their first meeting, he had sounded like he was ready to charge straight into Hellion territory without a plan.

“Akane. You got a map and a pen, right?”

“Hrm? Yep, I got it all.”

Each advisor had a variety of items stowed away in their Back-up Backpack, but they all had the same set of necessities.

“Doesn’t matter how long it takes. Fill in the southern end of this forest. I’ll take care of the north.”

“Okie dokie!” Akane cheerfully agreed. When it came to these kinds of orders, they stuck with her.

“And take that annoying edgy girl with you.”

“No problemo. Can’t wait to hear more stories... Hee hee!”

The Demon Lord felt a little uneasy about Akane’s reaction, but he was more concerned that his head would explode if he went to fill out his map with Mynk alone.

“Make a lot of noise. Move whenever you want, day or night,” the Demon Lord instructed Akane. “Return to Rookie when you need a break. Make sure to rest in a safe location.”

“Alright, *Teach*. I want to go on this field trip, already.”

(Field trip, huh...?) The Demon Lord nearly let out a laugh at the innocuous comparison, but made sure that Akane knew all the basics. “It goes without saying, but don’t engage anyone in combat. It’s a waste of time. You understand your mission, right?”

“You’re telling me I can’t go out and play? Suuuch a buzzkill.”

“Buzzkill...? Don’t screw this up, Akane.”

With that, the Demon Lord nonchalantly leapt off the fortress wall. This was nothing short of a serious invasion into Animania.

The Demon Lord and the Firebrand

The Demon Lord landed on his feet and began walking into the forest without a care.

Olgan rushed after him. “H-Hey... How can you be so reckless? There has to be a better way to...”

“Don’t worry about it. Akane will draw all the attention. We’re the real eyes of our team.”

“You’re using her as a distraction...?”

The decision seemed a little heartless to Olgan, but the Demon Lord didn’t see it this way. He was only using the same strategy he had used in his Game. When a new area was released, the players naturally started with a blank map, unaware of where anything was. Many players spent a lot of time tackling the world of Akira Ono by uncovering his numerous hidden elements, skills, and items. Now, all the same, the Demon Lord had to conquer a brand new map.

Not to mention, the Demon Lord had been feeling a certain possibility since coming to this expansive forest. (In this forest... I feel something akin to the Shrine of Wishes...)

That was where he met the (presumable) Still Angel. Since the incident at the Shrine had served as sort of a catalyst for his journey in this world so far, the Demon Lord was not going to pass through this forest without a thorough investigation.

Keeping his true intentions hidden, he came up with an excuse that sounded professional enough. “When we have limited resources, a complete victory is impossible without each member of the team serving their role.” This reasoning was based on the various roles that players undertook in his game: frontline fighters, long-range supporters, healers, saboteurs, *etc.* As he was reminiscing, he had verbalized the concept before he knew it.

“You’re right... When you put it that way.” Olgan conceded. This was the first time a sound point was made by this man, whom Olgan perceived to wield supernatural powers. Olgan, as one of the best adventurers in this world, was forever a realist. All thoughts and decisions were based on observations of reality. “You’re ready to pay the price to achieve your goal.”

Her eyes shone with an icy gleam. She never made the mistake of letting emotions dictate her actions, nor was she bound by arbitrary morals.

At this point, the Demon Lord realized that the conversation wasn't going in the direction he had expected it to. "Anything that can be achieved without sacrifice is trivial... And this operation is nothing but trivial." He billowed smoke and hot air like a forest fire in an attempt to curve Olgan's fervent enthusiasm.

(She seems too tense. Like she's got too much stake in this...)

In fact, Olgan's resolve was extraordinarily strong, and that was clear to see. The Demon Lord scratched his head, unsure of what to do with Olgan's energy. At the same time, Olgan was unsure of how to process the Demon Lord's boisterous claim that waging war against a Grand Devil was merely trivial.

"As cocky as ever... What do we do now?" Olgan asked.

"Watch and learn." The Demon Lord looked back up at the fortress.

Mynk and Akane were still causing a commotion. Akane was smiling without a shred of nervousness. "Alright, Princess Edge! Let's go!"

"Seriously, what does that even mean—eeean!?"

Akane grabbed Mynk by her collar and leapt into the forest, as cheerful as a child on a field trip.

"Here I come, animal people! I can't wait to fluff them all!"

"Fluff...!? Do you understand how dangerous this place is!?"

"You seem like the kind to know a lot of spells. Teach me some later?"

"The Anima are much more ferocious than you can...!"

"Woooooo hooooo!"

The pair hipped and hopped into the forest.



The Demon Lord silently groaned as he watched them leave, but Olgan seemed happy about it.

“If she keeps that up, all the Anima will be drawn to them.”

“Mm.” The Demon Lord nodded, as if everything had gone according to plan.

He began to explain his plan moving forward, which was a simple strategy that illuminated his scrupulousness. “First, we’ll disappear into the forest and thoroughly investigate it.”

“That’s fine, but what about our scent? They’ll sniff us out.”

“In that case, we’ll use this... **Craft Novice Item: Deodorizing Spray.**”

The Demon Lord produced yet another garbage item with 1 Attack and sprayed himself from head to toe. This, too, was originally a one-use projectile. It was designed, however, with an incredible effect.

Olgan sniffed the air. “I can’t smell the tobacco on you anymore...”

“It’s called Fab-breeze. It deodorizes and disinfects.”

“Where were you keeping that— Pff! Stop!”

“Breathe happy!” The Demon Lord uttered some bizarre marketing phrases as he sprayed Olgan up and down.

“What do you think you’re doing!?”

“Just a touch of personal hygiene. This will make those sniffers’ noses blind to us,” the Demon Lord said as he employed his Stealth Stance. “Forgot to ask you before, but you can conceal yourself, right?”

“It’s insulting that you even asked... **Nightmare.**”

As Olgan cast her spell, she completely vanished in an instant. The Demon Lord could no longer sense her presence either. While she had cast it with ease, the spell was Class 5, magic so powerful that only a handful of magic users on the continent could wield it.

“Wonderful,” the Demon Lord remarked. “Let’s go for a stroll through the woods, shall we?”

“A stroll... I’m curious how much more boisterous you’ll get.”

—Somewhere in the Animania forest.

A bull-hybrid man swallowed the hay he had been chewing on when he sensed the presence of a human. He was surrounded by bales of hay, as if he were buried in a haystack. He dwelled in a cottage built to serve as a lookout for their border, which was an extremely boring job, but it was the perfect post for him. Bull-hybrids all had incredible strength and stamina, but were mostly lazy. They usually spent their days in a stupor, occasionally munching on grass. This would make their species unfit for watch duty, except that this location was practically ignored by all. Certainly, no feeble human would dare cross the border. All in all, there was nothing to do. Beside him, a dwarf was snoring away, bottle in hand.

“Moove it, old man. There’s a human around here.”

“You dim-witted cow. It’s just the usual.” The dwarf rolled over, annoyed.

The dwarf had taken advantage of the bull-hybrid’s post to make deals with Olgan, which went down like this: first, his female cat-hybrid accomplice snuck into Hellion territory to acquire information Olgan was willing to pay for, while a giant served as her bodyguard. Olgan would prepare rare monster parts in return, but they couldn’t work out a deal amongst themselves, since neither the cat-hybrid nor giant were interested in any monster parts. That’s where the dwarf came in, providing the cat-hybrid and giant with reserve bottles of dwarven ale in exchange for the monster parts from Olgan. The bull-hybrid on watch would turn a blind eye in return for a cut of the ale. In short, they had formed a peculiar triangular trade. Perhaps it was inevitable when the participating parties were all of varying species, with completely different wants and values from one another.

“Hmph... The girl again? I’d rather sit here and drink, but...” In contrast to his comment, the dwarf began packing with gusto. The truth was that he was always expectant of the rare monsters he couldn’t acquire in Animania, but dwarves were a prideful species. He would have never let anyone know of his excitement.

“Moo. There’s another human, old man.”

“You moron. It’s got to be the same annoying girl.”

Even dwarves seemed to find Mynk annoying. If she had been here to hear it, she would have blown the cottage away with her Holy magic.

“Moo... Humans are so skinny. They need to put on some weight.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

Both of them much preferred a woman with some stability, like a thick and deep-rooted tree. To them, both Olgan and Mynk seemed like fragile twigs.

“Moo. I’ve never seen that human before.”

“Hmm? That’s walking a thin line... She’s forgotten her place, hasn’t she?” The dwarf’s expression twisted in disgust.

Despite his complaining, the dwarf fully respected Olgan’s power, and the fact that she was a Firebrand even more so. Of course, he had no intention of making deals with more humans. One in his life was more than enough.

“What do we do, old man?”

“All we need’s the girl. We get rid of any others.”

The consensus among the Anima was that humans, despite their clearly inferior capabilities, saw Anima as inferior and publicly discriminated against them, calling them ‘demi-humans.’ The dwarf let out a chuckle.

“Moo. I just need to beat them up?”

“No need to hold back against humans. Crack their skulls open if they give you trouble,” the dwarf spat out.

The Anima had experienced countless conflicts with humans throughout the history of Animania. Each time, the Anima had defeated the humans with ease, reminding them of their inherent inferiority.

“...Into the woods! Into the woods to fluff some pals!”

The pair heard a strange voice from outside of the cottage. The dwarf ran outside to find a girl hopping her way across the border into Animania.

“What is that girl doing...? Get up, you cow! Sound the alarm!”

“Moo... I’m still digesting that hay. It’s unhealthy to get up so fast after eating.”

“You bonehead! What kind of watch are you!?”

Soon, the commotion in the forest grew, the Animania border growing more chaotic by the second. The Demon Lord’s attempt to quietly investigate the area from the shadows had succeeded.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord was wandering throughout the forest, a tri-color pen and notebook in hand. The endless forest was filled with trees, flowers, fruits, nuts, and all sorts of vegetation that were completely foreign to the Demon Lord.

“Hm. Let’s call the area around the border A-01 for now. Any building or village would serve as a landmark...”

Olgan was meticulously observing the Demon Lord, as if she wanted to mentally record his every move. Still, the Demon Lord continued to flicker like a mirage, and occasionally turned completely invisible.

(How is this possible without magic...?)

Olgan had to focus her entire mind just to keep watching the Demon Lord without him disappearing. His presence was so barely noticeable, she almost felt like she was hallucinating him. Considering that Olgan had the advantage of knowing that the Demon Lord was there before her, she imagined that no one else would stand a chance at finding him. Suddenly, a voice interrupted her contemplation.

I almost forgot. I’ll form a team with you temporarily.

Just as the Demon Lord’s voice echoed in her head, Olgan could clearly see him again. She discerned that the Demon Lord had used some sort of ability to remotely send his voice.

How handy. Is this another one of your powers?

Yes.

I can even see you clearly now...

Naturally. What sense would it make if my allies couldn't see me?

The Demon Lord was reminded of a huge blunder he had made back in the day. When he had first added Stealth Stance to the game, even the user's allies could barely see them. It resulted in major backlash from the players.

Akira Ono bluffed his way through it. "This was by design, so everyone can experience the effect of the newly implemented Stealth Stance. Of course, you will be able to clearly see any allies in the next Game, even when they are in Stealth Stance."

He was promptly consumed with adjusting the code before the next Game started. Akira was always using his mistakes to his advantage, making everyone think that he had made those choices on purpose. Seeing that this hadn't changed a bit after coming to this world, one could only assume that he had missed his calling as a scam artist.

Allies, huh...? Just curious, but how many people can you speak to at a time this way?

If there was no limit to how many people he could send his voice to, Olgan thought, this power would surely become a revolutionary tool of communication. Moreover, it could revolutionize war strategies.

There's a limit to the number of people per team. Maximum of ten, under normal circumstances.

Initially, Akira had set the maximum members of a team to five players. After a turn of events, he increased it to ten in the revitalized edition of the game. Olgan was oblivious to that kind of history, of course, but she picked up on the condition the Demon Lord had mentioned.

And under abnormal circumstances?

Ha! A hell of a party. The Demon Lord chuckled, much to Olgan's confusion.

When the Sleepless Castle came under siege (after certain conditions were met), the Emergency Worldwide Broadcast became available to the players. Communication was unlocked to and from every single player around the

world. Imagine the typical chat box in an MMO. Every single communication, in various languages, all converged in each player's chat box. 'Unlock' was Akira's sarcastic way of channeling the chaos the sieges brought about.

Hell of a party... That's what it sounds like over at the border right now. Olgan turned in the direction they had come from.

Akane's quick on her feet. No one could catch her, even if they knew where she was.

The Demon Lord continued through the forest unaffected. His eyes never stopped moving, as if he was trying to analyze the entire forest around him. He scribbled things down in his notebook, knocked on trees, picked up leaves, stared at particular sprouts of vegetation, and so on. All in all, he seemed perfectly happy-go-lucky.

Olgan was watching it all, unsure of what to make of it. The Demon Lord wielded a peculiar quill that changed colors at the flick of his finger. Anyone else would have been thoroughly astonished by a tool like that, but Olgan remembered seeing a few items like that in the depths of some dungeons... They were called Ancient Fragments. Some were more complex than others, and they all varied in shape and function. The only thing all of the Ancient Fragments had in common was that they could not be recreated.

(Wrong time period? Wrong technology? Perhaps they're a form of Ancient Magic...) Olgan used to contemplate these questions now and again, but made a habit out of suppressing her curiosity. Pursuing such things wouldn't put food on her table. She wanted not for the romance of discovery, but a more tangible source of power. For unparalleled strength.

(He's getting to me...) Each time Olgan spoke with the Demon Lord, and as he displayed powers of invisibility and remote communication, she nearly forgot where she was. (The man called 'the Demon Lord' is gleefully strolling through Animania with an Ancient Fragment in his hand...)

While she felt ridiculous putting it that way, she saw the scene before her in a different light when she considered that the man before was a creature of mythology. (Could it be... that I'm participating in the making of a legend?) Once the thought entered her mind, the bizarrely ordinary stroll through the

forest seemed incredibly special. Much to her misfortune, the Demon Lord's appearance carried enough gravitas to encourage such a mindset.

Not bad... Looks good, in fact, Olgan couldn't help but mutter.

Hm? The Demon Lord turned around. While Olgan had meant it with an almost artistic appreciation for their situation as a scene out of a myth or fairytale, the Demon Lord simply took her comment at face value, as if she was talking about his appearance. *Most people find it intimidating.* He chuckled in self-deprecation, turning his gaze back to the notebook in his hand.

Even his response was surprising to Olgan. The Demon Lord's every movement seemed refreshing, like she was a witness to the forming of a new myth.

Just so you know, this research will take a while, the Demon Lord added.

I see... You're more careful than I'd imagined.

I don't know what you've been imagining, but I've always acted with caution when it comes to things that concern me.

No arguments here. Play this however you like.

Even by Olgan's standards as a world-class adventurer, the Demon Lord's research was thorough and meticulous. On the other hand, the Demon Lord didn't think he was acting out of the ordinary. Akira Ono was simply as much of a gamer as he was a creator. He couldn't stand not exploring every route in an adventure game, not conquering every country in war-time simulators, and not completing every dungeon in RPGs. He would have remained in the Bastille Dungeon to explore every nook and cranny if he had not acknowledged the dungeon to be a mere tutorial.

Good number of traps, here and there. Very studious of them... Their locations aren't bad, either.

Complimenting their defenses...? What makes you think that way? Olgan had patiently followed the Demon Lord along, but couldn't contain a particular question that had been burning in her. *Why are powers restricted?*

The Demon Lord knew as much as her when it came to that, but he couldn't

afford to let any information slip when he wasn't sure whether or not Olgan would remain an ally.

(An ally...)

They had joined forces for the time being, but that didn't guarantee an everlasting alliance. Therefore, the Demon Lord decided to counter with a question of his own.

Why do you want to kill your fa... this devil, anyway?

Olgan knew that the Demon Lord didn't have any knowledge about the demon, let alone any grudges. If he had been a cleric, that might have been reason enough for him to want to kill a demon, but Olgan felt like she couldn't expect the man before her to make any decisions based on morality. In fact, it almost seemed like he would cooperate with any devil if that would advance his cause.

Just to clarify... Do I need to answer that?

Wouldn't bother me if you didn't. I will simply continue towards achieving my objective.

Olgan inferred the subtext in the Demon Lord's response. As long as his objective was met, he wouldn't necessarily oppose the demon. She reluctantly began to explain.

My mother was a human. He raped her... because he could. Then she had me.

(Should *not* have asked that...) If the Demon Lord could go back in time, he would have clocked himself in the face for asking such a weighted question.

The Goddess Akane!?

"Let's-a-go!" Akane shouted like some red-hatted plumber, and continued through the forest.

Mynk desperately followed with a horde of Anima in tow.

"Where do you think you are, you puny humans!?" the Anima shouted along the way.

Color steadily drained from Mynk's face as their numbers and anger grew. Even an S-rank adventurer like her wouldn't stand a chance against that many Anima.

"D-Don't you have a brain!?" Mynk protested.

"Probably!" **Survival Skill: Lucky Star!** Akane avoided stepping into a trap on the ground without realizing it. "Phew, that was close... Ah, what's that up there!?" **Survival Skill: Lucky Star!** A net came falling from above, but she dodged that too. By accident. **Survival Skill: Lucky Star!** "Wow, look at this delicious apple that fell right into my hand! *Nom nom.*"

Mynk couldn't believe her eyes. "H-How did you...? Wh-What are you, even!?"

"Huh? I told you, I'm the superstar of the Sleepless Castle!" Akane's thorough happy-go-luckiness had left even Mynk speechless. Still, with Akane leading the way, they had successfully dodged any and all traps and ambushes. "My fan club's awesome, you know! They have these glow sticks... Ow!" **Survival Skill: Lucky Star!** Akane had tripped and fallen on a tree root, but she found a beautiful sea shell next to her face. "Cool! I found something shiny!" To top it off, a crow dropped something out of its beak from the sky above. Akane picked it up to see that it was an old gold coin. "Oooh, it's golden! You think I can buy some snacks with this? Snackies?"

"I... can't believe it... Seriously, what's with you?" Mynk mumbled. While Lucky Star was a Survival Skill that allowed a player to avoid all negative random events, the only explanation that made sense in Mynk's mind was that Akane was favored by a higher existence. "Don't tell me... You're blessed by the Goddess of Destiny!?"

Every move Akane made resulted in something good. Even what seemed like bad luck at first glance turned out to benefit her in the end. How could anyone reasonably accept such a reality?

"Goddess of...? Well, I'm pretty much a goddess. I mean, look at me."

"I can't hold a conversation with you... Must I unleash 'the other me'...?"

"Another you? Some shadowy doppelganger? Or do you have multiple emo

personalities!?”

“Multiple? I’ve never thought of that. I *could* have more than one alternate personality...”

Their conversation was bordering on nonsensical. It seemed they would have to spend a lot more time together before they could properly communicate with one another.

Meanwhile, the Anima in pursuit of them were just as shocked that Akane had dodged every single trap in her path.

“Why won’t she fall into any of the traps!?”

“I’m a deer, dear. How should I know?”

“Hey, you bison! How’d she see through all our ambushes, too!?”

“I’m getting super confused, you guys...”

Various Anima shouted at each other. The pursuit party consisted of packs of wolf-hybrids, deer-hybrids, mole-hybrids that practically swam through the ground, and even some black bull-hybrids, as well as merfolk (who rarely came up on land) and lizard people. They had all seemed to emerge from their respective nests, surprised by the first human intrusion in a long time.

“Why are those humans even here...!?”

“I bet they escaped from the slave market over in Hellion territory!”

Akane turned back at the Anima and became visibly disappointed. “There’s a lot of them back there, but they’re not quite what I’d imagined. I wonder if there’s a fluffy one somewhere?”

“You know we’re dead if they catch us, right...? You really are out there.” Tired of following Akane, Mynk stopped in her tracks. She held a sacred book in her hand, which she had labeled ‘Book of Darkness.’ A magic circle appeared around her, and Mynk’s disappointment immediately shifted to excitement. She began her incantation. “Abyssal darkness, woe be unto the impure fools...! **Holy Mist.**”

Instantly, the forest was filled with divine mist. Soon, the mist began to illuminate, blinding the Anima with haze and light.

“Aaagghhhh!”

“My eyes! My eyes!”

“Ow! That’s my foot you stepped on!”

“I’ve always wanted adventure in the great white beyond...”

“I can’t see a thing!”

—Chain Incantation

“Shine on me, o sun of sorrow... Thou hast no escape from calamity... Hear the footsteps of ravenous Death!”

—Chain o’ Angels

As Mynk shouted into the heavens, countless tiny angels appeared from above, each with a set of chains in their tiny hands. One after another, they began binding the Anima. The scene was completely contradictory to the incantation it followed, but even the strongest of Anima would struggle to break free of these restraints.

“Woah, now these chains...!?”

“Owww!”

“I can’t move, *blub blub*... Hey, little mole... Get me out of this!”

“Whadda ya askin’ me for? Try doin’ it yourself, eh?”

As the Anima blundered in confusion, Akane started to tremble and cried out in excitement. “No! Way!” She couldn’t contain it after seeing a magic spell unfold for the first time. “You’re so cool, Emo Girl! I’m, like, blown away!”

“Huh...? Y-Yeah, well.”

“Hey! Hey! Won’t you teach me that!? I want to do magic, too!”

“Teach you...? You’re the Demon Lord’s kin, aren’t you?”

“Come on! ...Oh well. See it once, seen it all.”

“You lost interest already!? But okay, let’s get out of here!” Mynk began to run off.

“Okie dokie hokie pokie!” Akane followed suit, yelling some nonsense.

Now that the pursuing team of Anima had been immobilized, the commotion in the southern forest only grew as Akane ran with complete ease and freedom.

Mynk had finally made up her mind to ask Akane an important question. “Akane, right...? Can you please just answer me one question seriously?”

“Hm? Whazap?”

“You know what you’re doing, right? After the mess we’ve caused, we’re not going to make it out of Animania alive.”

“Huh? I don’t want to sleep out here. Sure I got my Camping Gear, but... Let’s just go home, then.”

“Go... home?”

Akane ignored Mynk’s confusion as she produced a pair of Moon Shoes from her Back-up Backpack and put them on. She clung onto Mynk without giving her a chance to react.

“H-Hey!” Mynk protested.

“Mmm, so soft... These are some naughty marshmallows. Poke! Poke!”

“Stop, that... tickles...! Staaaa—!?”

Burying her face into Mynk’s ample bosom, Akane leapt off of the ground and Quick Traveled to the city of Rookie.

Mynk was dumbfounded by the sudden change in scenery. “Huh...? What the...?”

“These are my trusty amigos, *Numero Dos*. With *Uno*, I can glide down a snow-capped mountain to the sand dunes. Pretty impressive, huh?” Akane put away her Moon Shoes and started walking into the city without looking back at Mynk.

Despite having used an incredible magical item, Akane seemed unaffected by it. This confused Mynk even further, but she accepted the reality that Akane wasn’t going to explain anything to her. “I-I guess we’re lucky just to make it out alive... Not that Olgan would have any trouble,” Mynk tiredly muttered to herself. She had yet to find out that she would be forced to jump in and out of Animania for days on end, with Rookie serving as their base camp. “Let’s get

some rest for the night... I'm so tired of asking questions."

Just as Mynk turned towards an inn, a clear voice called to her from behind. "Thank you very much for your help the other day."

Mynk turned to find the paladin she had been acquainted with before, who was bowing to her in display of gratitude. She now noticed that restoration work was starting up around the city, despite the early hour of the morning. At one of the sites nearby, she saw the Trinary carrying large rubble with their upper bodies exposed.

"No need to thank me," she answered. "Not like I had anything better to do... I take it you haven't changed," Mynk muttered as she looked over Weeb.

He spent his life for others and asked for nothing in return. To be honest, Mynk found his dedication to saving the people of a foreign country to border on insanity.

"Your friend isn't with you today."

"Yes. Olgan's..." Mynk caught herself.

While Olgan used numerous magical items to conceal her identity as a Firebrand, she hadn't succeeded at deceiving this paladin.

(But he won't say anything about it. What's on your mind, Mister Paladin...?)

Perhaps he was turning a blind eye because Olgan was half-human. Perhaps he found some value in Olgan. As Mynk continued to speculate, Weeb bowed once more, his usual mannerism. "Please give her my thanks as well."

"S-Sure... I'll do that."

"I have not much to give you two, but here's the best token of gratitude that I can..."

"I don't need your money. Stop thinking about everyone else for once. Thinking about how you'll fare in your homeland..." Mynk stopped short, realizing that her advice would fall on deaf ears.

She'd had the same conversation with him numerous times before. Weeb wasn't going to change his way of life after hearing the same advice again.

“I think I’ll stay here for a while,” the paladin said.

Obviously he was going to remain so he could help with the restorations. He wouldn’t earn a single bronze coin from it, either. His work would be utterly uncompensated.

“Thought you might. I will pray that the blessing of darkness may be upon you. It’s the least I can do.”

“...Thank you for your kind words,” Weeb said with a hesitant smile.

After another bow, he quietly left. A ‘blessing of darkness’ would be quite a problem for a paladin, but Weeb had wisely decided to ignore it.

“Alright, I’ve got to get some rest,” Mynk muttered to herself. “I must contain the darkness that has been magnified...” With that nonsensical comment, Mynk let out a wide yawn and began walking to the inn. Hearing the voices of all of the people working hard to restore the city, Mynk couldn’t help but let a smile form on her face. “Humans are weak, but resilience is the one thing we have the demons beat in...” Mynk leisurely gazed out at the city glowing in the morning light.

The Decision at Gatekeeper

——Gatekeeper, in northern Holylight.

Gatekeeper was an enormous fortress on the border of Holylight and one of its neighbors, where countless battles had been fought. Amidst all of the scalding, arid landscapes of Holylight, this region was the only exception. Throughout history, the weather of northern Holylight had always been unpredictable. Even now, a blizzard raged around the fortress, as its occupants remained hidden like moles in their holes. A blizzard often (but not always) changed to a scorching heatwave by the following morning, and gusts of wind strong enough to uproot buildings ransacked the city. This perilous land and the border it neighbored were guarded by the militaristic nobles. The militaristic nobles had grown tired of central politics and come to form a formidable force on the northern border of their nation. Their leader, Harts, had just barely contained these nobles under him, his leadership the only thing keeping them

from going rogue.

Today, however, Harts received a message even he couldn't maintain his composure over.

"That fox... What is she thinking amidst such a crisis!?" He shouted.

According to his messenger, Madam Butterfly's caravan of merchants was going to leave for the Northern Nations through Gatekeeper. Harts' patience had run dry for the Madam, who seemed to have been more concerned about frivolously wasting her money away on foreign soil.

"That wanna-be empress...! This is the third time already!"

Harts had an impeccable memory. This was, indeed, the third time this outlandish caravan had departed for the Northern Nations. The last time, the Madam herself had joined the caravan, and journeyed all the way up to the city-states.

...I want to see snow.

When the Madam told Harts the motivation for her trip, Harts' vision turned red from anger. It snowed plenty in Holylight. The central nobles, drunk with extravagance, had always written off the militantly-defended north of Holylight and the wasteland-ridden east as 'untouchable.' To Harts, the way the Madam had declared her intentions was as if she deemed the snowflakes of Holylight themselves to be savage and unworthy of her gaze. Of course, the Madam meant no ill intentions. She only wanted to see soft, falling powder snow to help heal her threadbare heart. Still, the conflict between them made Harts and the Madam speak few words to each other, leading to them often misunderstanding the other's intentions.

"Don't tell me she wants to *see snow* again." Harts glared at his messenger.

"N-No, sir. The Madam is not joining the caravan this time."

Harts gazed out of the window in an attempt to keep down a vile sensation. To their misfortune, the night was ruled by a blizzard, raging as if it were trying to freeze over even the earth below them.

('Savages defending untouchable land,' they call us... You central nobles

would have been long gone without us.) Harts couldn't help but grip his fists tight. The militaristic nobles, under the leadership of Harts, had defended the border and people of Holylight with severe bloodshed. (That buffoonish woman, on the other hand...)

...Played the role of an empress in the safety of the capital. Even her sister indulged in 'art,' both of them reveling in extravagant wastefulness. The Butterfly sisters, from Harts' perspective, were nothing more than a national enemy, gnawing at the country from within.

"Apparently, she learned nothing from the attack on the Holy City..."

The Holy City had suffered tremendous damage from the Satanists' attack. Several factors contributed to the demons' defeat, but none of the attack's root issues were solved. People still drowned in poverty in the shadows of the exceedingly rich nobles. Without a fundamental change to Holylight's class system, Harts assumed, there would be another attack sooner or later. Those desperate enough to escape poverty forsook their hometown or village and became bandits. Their final destination, as Harts saw it, was Satanism.

"Um, Lord Harts... One other thing."

"Spit it out."

"Apparently, Lady Luna is among the caravan..."

"Lady Luna?"

Harts couldn't make the connection between Luna, a Holy Maiden, and the Madam's caravan. As far as he was concerned, the two barely knew each other.

"This is only a rumor, sir... But I have heard that the Madam is in rehabilitation in the village of Rabbi..."

Harts crossed his arms in contemplation. Gatekeeper was a long way from the village of Rabbi, leaving him unable to verify the rumor any time soon. Still, Harts got a strange feeling about the combination of Luna and the Madam.

(I remember that the 'Demon Lord' went north, too...) Harts was reminded of someone who headed north, despite it being in the middle of war season. As Harts recalled, he was an unscrupulous man that had secured the position of

Luna's patron without anyone noticing. To top it off, there was the rumor that he had blown a medium-rank devil to bits during the attack on the Holy City without even breaking a sweat. (Is he the connection between them...?) He could have been the one that connected Luna and the Madam, and in fact, Harts saw no other possibility. And at the center of the triangle they formed was the village of Rabbi.

(What is he scheming at...? Besides, there's no way that woman moved to some desolate village without a plan to hatch.) It was only natural that Harts would believe so. The Madam, he knew, before she made her acquaintance with the Demon Lord, had held events every other day, passing her time in the glamorous world of high society. (In any case, I must speak with Sambo.)

As Harts turned to summon his right-hand man, Sambo himself entered the room. He held a sealed letter in his hand.

"Another one of her fits, it seems!" Sambo cackled as he sat on a chair.

The man who had initially brought the news served each of them a cup of warm soup before excusing himself out of the room.

"What is she thinking, Sambo?"

Seeing Harts' expression, Sambo's laughing faded. He saw that this was no longer something he could laugh off.

"The letter contained her usual spout and the casual mention of Lady Luna's presence. An impulsive shopping trip is nothing new to her, but this is getting a bit out of hand."

Harts gritted his teeth. If he had control over the money she spent on impulsive shopping, he could make significant steps to combat the poverty in Holylight.

As if he could read Harts' mind, Sambo added to console him, "High society and whatnot is beyond me, but it's undeniable that her wastefulness has helped the economy of this country in no insignificant way."

At her parties and balls, various delicacies were served on masterfully crafted plates to a crowd wearing unbelievably expensive dresses and jewelry. All of those components led to creating jobs in the country, which helped the working

class in turn. Just to name a few examples, the Madam's partying had provided work for chefs, farmers, wineries, dish-makers, painters, musicians, carriage-builders, coachmen, dress-makers and seamstresses, jewelers, carpenters, and hired guards. If the extravagant parties were to cease, so would the demand for many of these services. That would naturally lead to numerous lost jobs.

Harts understood this, too. He gazed out at the blizzard once again. "I get it, Sambo. And that you're right, in some way."

"I apologize for running my mouth, sir."

Harts could have seen the Madam's spending as a contribution to the economy, rather than wasteful. Still, it wasn't so easy for him to flip that switch, especially when he knew that the nobles' extravagance was only made possible by his men sacrificing their lives in defense.

"We'll forget about her wastefulness for now. It's her prerogative how she spends her money. Who are we to argue against that?"

"Yes... sir..."

Sambo could only feebly agree. Harts's declaration was undertoned by the deaths of his men in the thousands, who all gave their lives on the battlefield. Sambo was caught in between Harts and the Madam. He understood both Harts' outrage from having defended the north in solitude despite being labeled a 'savage' by the central nobles, and the Madam's prideful display of the power she gained with nothing but her own merit as she grew up being mocked and looked down on by other nobles. Still, there was a large divide between Harts and the Madam, in terms of both geography and mindset.

"That being said... I'm surprised to see Lady Luna leave the country." Sambo gently changed the subject.

"Hm..."

Sambo truly didn't understand her motivation. "I thought that Lady Luna never felt comfortable around the Madam... Perhaps they discovered that they had their self-centeredness in common." Sambo chuckled, and sipped at his soup that had become a little too chilled.

In truth, Luna and the Madam were similar in both their self-centeredness

and pride. Harts had no issue with them getting along. The problem was the involvement of the enigmatic 'Demon Lord.' There were too many inexplicable rumors going around in Holylight, like the one about the Dragonborn.

(What does he want from putting Lady Luna and the Madam together...?) The ominous notion of *coup d'état* crossed his mind. Using Luna's status as a Holy Maiden and the Madam's finances... (Ridiculous. It's not even worth entertaining the idea.) No coup was made possible with only religion and money. A revolution required its own military, enough to control the country. Harts had once considered if he would reach out to him to get the militaristic nobles on his side.

"In any case, Lord Harts, Lady Luna will require some security up north, even if she travels in secret. Some dangerous forces lie beyond the border."

Sambo's words rang an alarm in Hart's mind. Suddenly, he saw an unexpected solution to the Demon Lord's predicament. (Will he dare...? Will she dare...?) Given the Demon Lord's venture north, Luna's sudden and secretive trip, and the Madam's caravan working as if to disguise the Holy Maiden, Harts now saw a very practical and impactful move. (Will they dare... recruit *external* forces...!?) Harts shuddered to his bones.

Many a dynasty had been dismantled through history by this approach. With this theory, all of their actions seemed to make sense. Harts could easily imagine the Demon Lord flying out to prepare a meeting with some foreign force. Luna would join him as the representative of the coup, and the Madam's caravan would pay for the foreign aid. Naturally, payment would include some of the Madam's land. Harts would have disregarded the plan as a fool's dream if it weren't for the foolish precedents in history when the power-hungry had taken in foreign powers to topple their own country.

(Foolish, but far from impossible.) The involvement of a foreign power would only accelerate the chaotic rifts within Holylight. With an opportunity to easily infiltrate Holylight, no enemy nation had a reason to decline such a proposal. (He must have healed Sambo's eyes to buy time with our militant forces... and even get me to betray my country through Sambo!)

"Lord Harts, allow me to guard Lady Luna personally..."

(He must have foreseen this situation, that's why he made Sambo available. He must have schemed ahead to entangle Sambo, leaving him no other choice but to join them...) At this rate, Sambo would be accused of treason for aiding in facilitating the invasion of foreign forces. He would not only lose any support from the militaristic nobles, but his title entirely. Once he did, he would have no choice but to switch his alliance to protect his family. (That scheming pig...! Or is all of this under the direction of the 'Demon Lord'?)

Harts was a very capable commander, one of the best in Holylight. By all means, he was the chief defender of the country. Because of his expertise, however, his thought process always leaned towards military strategy. If he had not been such a skilled strategist, he might have drawn a different conclusion. "No, I'll guard her myself," he declared.

"L-Lord Harts...! You'll leave the fortress!? I haven't aged so badly that I couldn't handle simple guard duty!"

"It's about time I have a little vacation."

"Still... If the unthinkable were to happen..."

"I've spent decades locked away in this fortress. Allow me this one indulgence."

"H-How can I object...?"

As Sambo struggled to believe his ears, Harts resolved to determine the motivations of this mysterious alliance. If he would find any treacherous intent, he would destroy them.

(The empress and the Demon Lord... I'll show you that this country won't bend to your will...!)

Leaving Sambo temporarily in charge of Gatekeeper, Harts left to accompany the caravan with a few soldiers in tow.

—A travel road in the Northern Nations, a few days later.

The caravan filled the travel road as far as the eye could see, all carriages moving at a snail's pace. The Butterfly banner waved throughout the caravan,

making it appear like something to be revered. Not even the ruler of a nation could mobilize a troupe of this magnitude with such ease, which only went to show the bottomlessness of the Madam's pockets.

The southern regions of Holylight were safe from war, and thus didn't cost their residents any fees in the military department. Nobles of the south lived in a completely different world than Harts and the rest of the northern residents of Holylight. Now, as he traveled with this ridiculous caravan, Harts was made painfully aware of that. To his displeasure, the size of the caravan wasn't the only ridiculous thing about this trip.

"You better call me princess throughout this trip!" Luna grandiosely declared, puffing her chest inside her carriage.

The coachmen around Luna's carriage hurried to bow, perhaps in fear of Luna's infamous tantrums, and treated her as if she really were a princess.

(Oh, Lady Luna...)

Harts, as usual, could not see any shred of Holy Maiden-ness in Luna. He saw her as a mere child who was coincidentally born with an exceptional gift in magic. She was juvenile, self-centered, and fickle. None of that would have been a problem if Luna didn't represent his country as one of the Holy Maidens. On the other hand, Harts was not so sheepish as to hesitate from direct speech because of anyone's status or mood.

"Pardon me, Lady Luna. If we address you as such, it would only make your protection more difficult."

"What, you've got a problem with my idea?"

The caravan was already a huge magnet for attention. If word got out that the caravan carried a 'princess,' they'd become slowly-marching ducks. The travel roads of the Northern Nations were, for the most part, lawless lands.

"If something were to happen, how could I possibly explain the situation to Lady Queen or Lady White?"

"Ugh... Don't remind me of them, it's not often I make it out of the country!" To Luna, her sisters were her rivals — cliffs she had to traverse. At times, the mere pressure of being around them nearly suffocated her. Being outside the

borders of Holylight was one of the only ways Luna could keep her mind clean of her sisters. “Fine, then... You may address me as ‘My Lady.’”

Obvious distaste crossed Harts’ face. ‘Princess’ and ‘My Lady’ both sounded like lucrative targets.

(I suppose it’s somewhat better than addressing her as a Holy Maiden...)

‘The Holy Maiden’ widely known in the Northern Nations was Killer Queen. Back in the day, in a battle known as ‘the Tragedy of Gatekeeper’ that took place near the border to Holylight, Queen had defeated and beaten every last soldier of the opposing three-nation alliance. Any survivors were stripped naked and hung from the fortress walls by rope. After that battle, Queen’s name became infamous throughout the Northern Nations. Any mention of a Holy Maiden in these parts could ignite a war in the span of a moment.

“...I’ll try my best.” Harts relented.

While in enemy territory, any thoughtless actions could cost them their lives. In fact, Harts himself was rather well known in the Northern Nations, so much so that he was clad in a set of standard armor, blending in with the other guards so as to conceal his identity.

“We’re still going this slow...? Can’t we just hurry things up a little?”

“In my humble opinion, I’m surprised that we’ve made it this far without any conflict.”

The Butterfly banners and the Madam’s outlandish precedents were to thank for this miracle. They had passed through numerous checkpoints along the travel road, but the soldiers stationed there waved the caravan through with brimming smiles. Some of them had even begged the caravan to stop by their villages. No checkpoint nor fortress was ever a problem for this caravan. In fact, they stopped at every village along the way to window-shop. This might have been like pulling off at random exits during a road trip to buy unique trinkets or local specialties.

After a few stops, Harts witnessed the unbelievable. Guides from villages throughout the nation approached the caravan.

(Are we really in enemy territory...?)

Harts had always crossed borders in an act of war. It wasn't uncommon for him to lead his battalion deep into enemy territory to cause significant damage. Often, they would even set villages on fire. To Harts, watching enemy civilians approach their caravan with brimming smiles made him feel like he was living a nightmare.

"Hm. This fabric is kind of cool... I'll take it."

"Y-Yes, miss! Thank you, miss!"

Any time Luna wanted something, the old butler of the Butterflies reached out to pay the villager. This march was the very height of status that Luna once dreamed of. Now, she looked and acted like a bona-fide princess.

She had been timid at first, but as she experienced the initial few buy-all-you-want shopping detours, her confidence and attitude had rapidly grown. She snatched up anything that drew her attention, and the old butler never stopped her, either. In fact, he only watched with a pleasant smile. Luna's spending was child's play compared to the Madam's. When the Madam shopped, it was like a giant whale swimming through villages and towns, small and large, swallowing them whole and leaving nothing but dirt in her wake.

"H-Hey, butler...?" Luna turned to the old Butterfly butler and whispered. "I think I've got a lot of stuff. Are you sure it's okay?"

"Ah, Lady Luna. Ever the embodiment of modesty. If we shall return with only what you've bought so far, the Madam would set me ablaze! For my sake, My Lady, allow yourself to want some more."

"R-Really? Then maybe I'll buy some more..."

(What a farce...) Harts frowned at the conversation, but he had no right to dictate how Luna or the Madam shopped, and was left with no choice but to watch in silence. Besides, Harts was well aware that women took extremely long to shop, and interrupting them would only end in disaster.

(Are we really going to go this slow the entire way?) If Luna was going to contact foreign forces on this trip, time was an important factor. The longer she took, the more risk of their coup being discovered.

(Perhaps the man who traveled there first is having trouble with setting up

the deal...) Recruiting or involving any foreign force was never as easy as it sounded on paper. Harts, an experienced military strategist, knew that any plan was useless until proven achievable out on the field.

(It's possible that the man is drowning in the repercussions of his theoretical masterplan.) While Harts respected Madam's political prowess to a certain degree, his opinion was that she was particularly detached from military operations. She had never had an opportunity to command a military of any capacity, nor reason to study any military statistics.

As if to prove Hart's theory, Luna shouted in frustration, "Boy, does he tick me off! 'Take all the time you need'!? 'Don't screw this up'!?"

"...Who do you mean?"

"Huh? *H-Him*, you know!"

"The man known as the Demon Lord... perhaps?"

"...Uh-huh." Luna turned away, puffing her cheeks, for some reason. While her silent treatment was formed in juvenile defiance, Luna's lips were tightly shut. Perhaps from the experiences in her early years, she had always treated the people of Holylight a certain way. In fact, she had actively snarled at anyone in a position of power who tried to approach her unprepared. Luna only dropped her animosity when dealing with people who were born into adversity, like Aku or the Bunnies. From her point of view, Harts was one of the most powerful men in the country, the leader of the militaristic nobles. She was not looking to spill her guts to someone like him. "Forget it, all right? Your job is to protect me! Defend your princess at all costs!"

"...Understood."

An old-fashioned warrior, Harts revered the Angel. On several occasions, he had felt Her blessing in combat. By the same token, he also revered the three Holy Maidens that served the Angel.

(I've always followed the wishes of the Holy Maidens as much as I can...) Harts had defended or steered White's, Queen's, and even Luna's (albeit rarely) actions on numerous occasions.

However, Harts was ready to change his stance on the Holy Maidens if a

rebellion was in works. “What are your thoughts on the current state of Holylight, Lady Luna?” He subtly changed the subject.

“‘My Lady,’ you mean.”

Harts quelled his emotions through the sheer power of his will, controlling himself before he erupted at Luna’s pettiness. He asked again. “What are your thoughts on the current state of Holylight... My Lady?”

“Rock. Bottom. Holylight’s helpless without my rule!”

Ordinarily, Harts might have brushed that comment off as juvenile bravado and recklessness, but...

“Now that he’s helping me, I can almost taste my victory as we speak!” Luna innocently continued.

Harts could almost feel the blood drain from his face. He hadn’t expected to hit the jackpot this soon.

“May I take that to mean you’re willing to push aside the other two?”

“No duh. Why should I spend my whole life doing my sisters’ biddings? Besides, he’s counting on me...!” Luna bashfully confessed, her cheeks lightly red.

Luna had not made any of those comments with much significance, but Harts internalized each of them and solidified his theory.

(After all, he’s the one who calls himself... No, it’s beyond any doubt that he has the brain for hatching demonic schemes.) Harts was now firmly certain of his interpretation.

The ‘Demon Lord’ whispered sweet nothings into Luna’s ear, puppeteering her as a royal servant to his end. It was only natural that he targeted Luna among the Holy Maidens, since she had no advisor she trusted.

“Do you plan to meet his expectations, Lady Luna?” Harts asked with purposefully vague diction, hoping deep down that Luna would prove his theory false, after all.

“You know, I don’t particularly like this country...” Luna answered, much to Hart’s surprise. He stared at Luna in astonishment, but she was as serious as

ever. “The one true thing I believed in, have always believed in, is the Wise Angel. I like beings that can grant my wish. I don’t care for anyone who wastes away in the lap of luxury without ever putting in any hard work, just because they were *born* that way.”

While it wasn’t the answer Harts had hoped for, he picked up on a lot of clues from that response. He contemplated how to address this problem. (The man must have performed any task necessary to prove that he could grant Lady Luna’s wish, putting her squarely under his thumb. Now she won’t even entertain anyone else’s advice.)

Although Harts’ thought process was off the mark here and there, he had understood the core of Luna’s situation. Luna was, indeed, drawn to the Demon Lord and his mysterious powers. Moreover, she was infinitely drawn to him developing her village at an incredible speed. She struggled to imagine anyone else who would put that much effort into a village of demi-humans that had been made pariahs by the entire country. One action spoke louder than a hundred promises. What’s more, the Demon Lord’s action was completely congruent with Luna’s philosophy in its specific simplicity. It wasn’t easy to break down that kind of relationship, especially for Harts, who had barely interacted with Luna before this trip.

“Just because we were born into our lives... It’s a painful truth for many of us nobles.”

“Oh, I wasn’t including you. I respect you, except when you take the side of my sisters over me.”

“You flatter me...” Harts continued to slowly drive the horses before him, as if some weight had slid off of his back.

While Luna’s streak of rebellion had been verified in his mind, Harts began to doubt if anyone was completely happy with the current state of Holylight. The higher-ups of the country were split into numerous factions while commoners turned to Satanism in search of an escape from crippling poverty. Harts saw the current state of his country as a burning hellscape, completely severed from the doctrine of the Angels.

(Perhaps I need to rethink what’s right and wrong in this world...)

Harts wondered if he would find some sort of answer during this journey. He wondered, at least, if he might find something that he never would have found within the confines of his fortress.

Agents in Black

—A Meeting within the Holy Castle.

White had been reading through various reports and working on paperwork. As the leading Holy Maiden, she had a wide variety of responsibilities.

In addition to any political duties, her regular tasks included foreign diplomacy and settling noble disputes. She negotiated with merchants, each with their own plan for profit, as well as dealt with complaints or disputes among the guilds. A Holy Maiden's judgment served as the final method of resolution in disputes that became too out of hand. Historically, the three Holy Maidens had divided these duties amongst themselves, but the current trio of Holy Maidens were off-balance in more ways than one. While White took care of all politics, foreign affairs, and dispute resolutions, the other two were free-spirited to a fault. Queen only worked during emergencies as a brute force unit, and showed no interest in any other obligations. Luna, on the other hand, poured herself into the world of magic, desperate to display her superiority. While she had begun dipping her toes in leadership with the village of Rabbi, she had no skills or knowledge in politics that could aid White. Anyone in White's shoes would be at their wit's end, sobbing into their pillow at the end of the day.

As White was hard at work, Queen kept her feet up on the table in her usual devil-may-care attitude, but opened one eye to listen to Fuji's report when he came in.

"The Madam's taking a caravan up north...?" Queen repeated. "Yeah, I remember her doing that a couple of times," she dismissed, uninterested in the contents of the report. Queen had not spoken more than superficial greetings or small talk to the Madam, let alone had any genuine interactions with her. In fact, since Queen would never have been caught dead in the Madam's high-

society parties, they only had a handful of interactions at all. “Let her buy all the crap she wants.”

“Still, my Queen... I’ve come to report the matter for the concern of Lady White,” Fuji added.

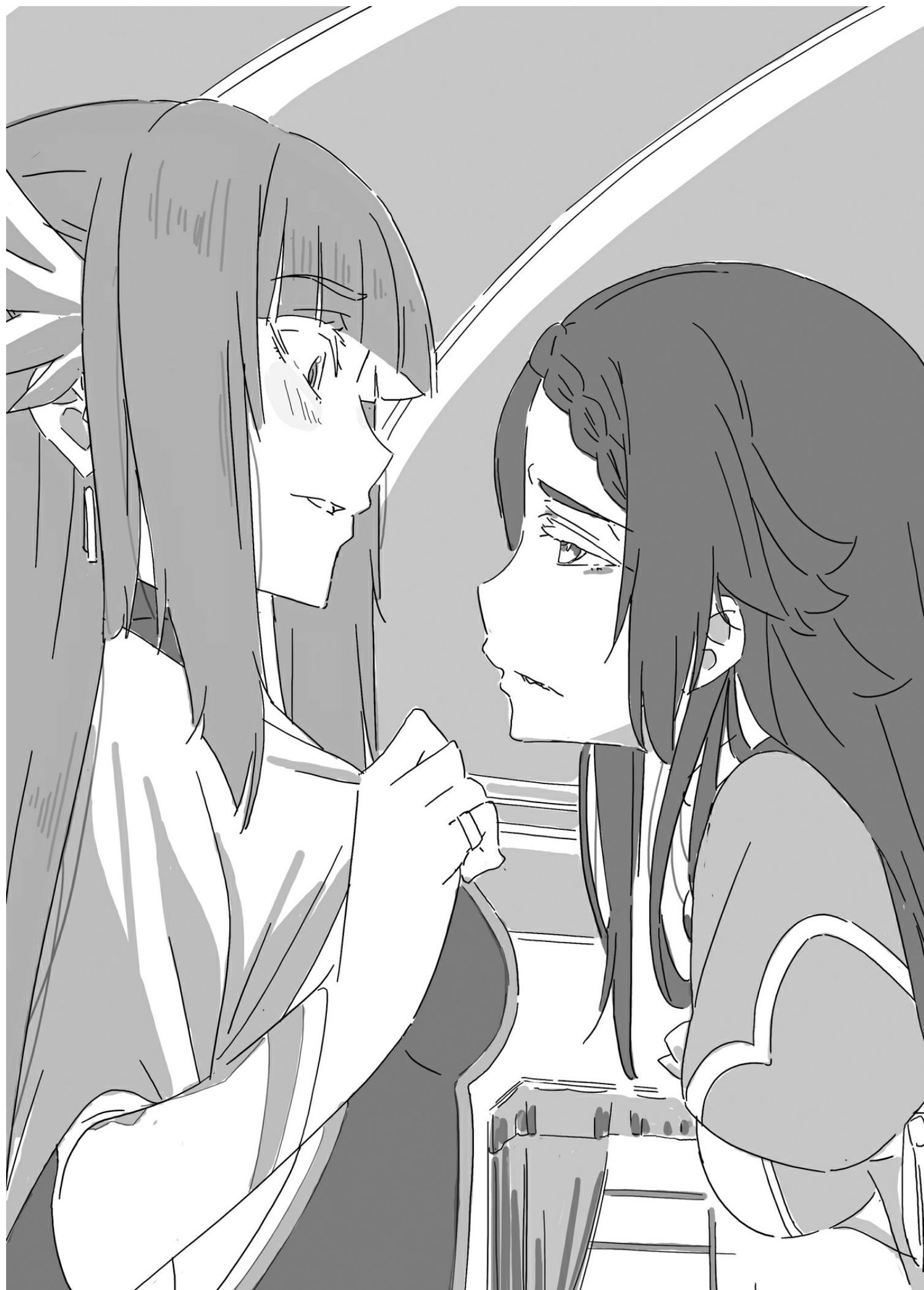
Queen cast White a glance as she looked up from her paperwork and returned a gentle smile. The divinely-glowing Angel’s Ring floated above her head. Even Queen, feared by the neighboring nations like a fearsome demon, struggled to look at it directly.

“You heard him, Sis... You gonna send another messenger in protest?”

There was no sanity in sending a caravan of an absurd scale up north during war season. White had sent messengers in reprimand or protest, but the Madam had returned each and every message with rude silence. From the Madam’s perspective, those messages of reprimand could not have come from a more infuriating source than White, who the Madam perceived to have been bestowed with infallible beauty, as if she had been blessed by the Angels themselves. While the Madam had her own share of trials and tribulations, White often clashed with the Butterfly sisters due to her stoic approach to rule. Ordinarily, White would have sent a messenger to protest the insensitive expedition while their country was in crisis.

“The Madam must have her reasons. I’ll let it slide this time.”

“...Look at you, all generous and shit.” Queen glared at White with contempt. Truth be told, Queen had always relished watching her innocently composed sister freak out at unexpected news. This time, however, White was strangely undisturbed. There was no doubt that she had been emboldened by the halo above her head. “I’m impressed, Sis... How was that ‘D’?” Queen added suggestively. She had decided to try and rattle her sister from a different angle.



“Wh-What is that supposed to mean...!?”

“You just seem like you’ve popped a certain kind of cherry... Hey, Fuji. Do all chicks get this way once they’ve mated?”

“S-Stop it! And ‘mating’!? Can’t you make it sound less vulgar!?” White jumped out of her seat, shaken by the sudden shift in the conversation.

However, Fuji was unwavering, forever loyal to Queen’s command. “Indeed, once women have experienced their *first*, they have a tendency to see more inexperienced women as inferior, and pity them.”

“I knew it,” Queen growled. “You got some balls, Sis! You wanna go, right now!?”

“What in the world are you talking about!?” Blushing, White sat back down. “You’re ridiculous.” She returned to her paperwork. There weren’t enough hours in the day for White to take these meatheads seriously.

“One more thing, my Queen.”

“Huh?”

“Lady Luna has absolved Wo Wungol, the leader of The Mole.”

“Really? The little bitch absolved someone...” Queen was surprised. She had never expected Luna to forgive anyone, much less pardon them of a crime. White seemed to be surprised too, as she listened in on the conversation while keeping up her work. “So, what? She’s gonna make this Mole guy sell out his friends?”

Fight fire with fire. This wasn’t an uncommon method of criminal pursuit around the world. Even in Japan, Ieyasu Tokugawa, a shogun of the Edo period, had captured the leader of the burglars’ gang and pardoned him to make him aid in capturing the rest of the burglars in the city.

“It seems that she’s making him dig for wells.”

“...Wells?” Queen lowered her feet from the table. There was no point in digging a well anywhere in the eastern wasteland, like rolling a giant rock up a hill that could not be scaled. “You mean... that’s her twist on this guy’s punishment?”

In this world, as well as on Earth, criminals were captured, imprisoned, and put to labor for a varying length depending on their crime. Queen had understood the order of digging wells to be his sentence.

“No, it seems she genuinely wants wells to be dug... The man’s a decent fighter, but he digs a better well than most professionals.”

“I don’t get it... Did her shithead brain melt from the heat?” Queen threw up her hands in defeat.

On the other hand, White understood that Luna must not have been the one to make such a bizarre command. (It must have been him...) She recalled a particular handsome man — the fallen angel, Lucifer, clad in a pitch-black long coat, gazing out into the distance. The scene at the stargazing bath flashed in her mind, brightly reddening her cheeks.

(Does Lord Lucifer intend to bless the eastern wastelands with water...?) By any rationale, that would be impossible. As far as impossibilities went, however, White knew very well that the halo above her head was more impossible than anything else. (After seeing all that hot water in that ‘Hot Springs Resort’...) It wasn’t impossible, White concluded. At his hands, it didn’t seem like a pipe dream. White couldn’t help but smile just imagining what miracle *he*, the one who ruled the night in the age of gods long ago, would pull off.

Queen, ever perceptive, noticed the slight change in her expression. “You’re thinking about him right now, aren’t you, Sis...?” Queen snarled, twisting her face in distaste.

Caught red-faced, White averted her eyes to a random spot on the ceiling. “Wh-Whatever do you mean...?”

Queen, a formidable warrior on and off the battlefield, did not relent. “There’s no mistaking it... That was the face of a *woman* if I’ve ever seen one. Hey, Fuji. You think I’m talking out of my ass?”

“No, my Queen. You’re absolutely correct.”

“Y-You... You two can just leave if you’re only going to interrupt my work!”

While the Holy Castle remained as cacophonous as always, suspicious figures loomed in its shadow.

—Dona's manor, western Holylight.

At the manor of Dona Dona, who ruled the rich mining district in western Holylight, another extravagant party was being held. Vibrantly-ornate dishes lined the tables, guests drinking wine straight from the bottle, each of which was worth the monthly salary of an average worker. The space was somewhat otherworldly, where cheers periodically erupted in different sections of the room and drunk nobles began singing.

However, the expression of Dona, who sat atop his throne, was less than cheerful. (The crowd is dwindling...) Dona was particularly sensitive to numbers, that is to say, the number of people he had under his control and the number of people who flocked to him. Seeing that the class of his parties had declined along with the number of attendees, Dona's blood boiled. The root cause of the decline was none other than the Madam, who had found a perch in the distant village of Rabbi. (Now the older sister... How dare those Butterfly sisters bare their teeth at me and my excellence!)

Many of the wives, the 'stars' of the show that was a high-society party, were not in attendance. Even nobles of opposing parties and forces usually showed up to each other's parties. Even when they weren't able to attend, they customarily sent flowers, or someone else to attend in their stead. But now, all of the absentees seemed to have forgotten their high-society etiquette.

(Those filthy, swinish sisters... I could burn their lands to the ground with the snap of a finger!) Dona was born into a massively powerful family, the epitome of nobility. For better or worse, he had childlike qualities. Since he was allowed to break any law and had had any wish granted since birth, Dona's world operated on a philosophy completely different from the rest of the world's.

Noticing Dona's shift in emotion, the man beside him spoke up. It was Shrimp Noodle, Dona's favorite nephew. "What is the matter, Uncle?"

"Shrimp. Haven't you noticed something about the party?"

"The guests become less and less easy on the eyes. What a shame. No one would have taken this party to be a congregation of the most significant nobles in the country." Squinting his ruthless eyes, Shrimp pushed up his bangs with a

self-important brush of the hand. The shape of his hair resembled a mushroom, while his clothes were visibly expensive. “Rumor has it, all the central wives are cooing and cawing over something called a ‘Hot Springs Resort.’”

“Hmph, that boar... She wastes her money on the most frivolous of nonsense,” Dona scoffed, without any self-awareness of his own frivolous series of weekly events.

“All ladies are drawn to trends... They’ll get over it eventually. Our pure blood will become tainted just from thinking about that untouchable village for long.”

“Hm... You may have a point.” Dona saw his nephew, much to his pride, as someone worthy and able to stand above and lead all nobles. Someone who weighed himself more heavily than anything else in the world, and who had the guts to treat others like lawn clippings. Those were the most important criteria, Dona believed, for a man to become a noble among nobles — a king. Dona’s personal beliefs aside, one could imagine the suffering this kind of man brought to his people. “In any case, I’ve sent Milligan to that village. He’ll bring some kind of news before long. A noble must also acquire the finesse to utilize even a rabid dog.”

“Incredible, Uncle. Your decision-making and jump to action is as fast as lightning. I see the blood of our courageous ancestors, who fought the King of Devils in the time of old, coursing through your veins.”

Dona tilted his wine glass back, gleeful at his nephew’s grandiose compliment. Shrimp had not said it in flattery, either, but in earnest. Through uniting many factions of the nobles and controlling western Holylight, the clan’s wealth and strength were at their peaks under Dona’s rule. His forceful rule and lust for power, for better or worse, had constructed the glamorous rises and falls of noble society in Holylight.

Shrimp made sure to sprinkle in a suggestion amidst the praise. “But, Uncle. We must deal with Buttersauce.”

“How do you mean...?” Dona twisted his brow at the mention of that revolting name.

“That woman plays the music box day in and day out at the salon, as if to boast. I’ve heard that she paints to its melody, and that the nobles of the more

artistic persuasion are enamored by the sight.”

“Grr... That piece...” The music box had become a sore spot for Dona. The one piece that had been snatched from under his nose in front of such a large crowd, after he had lost the auction mind-game.

“The mistake was beneath you, Uncle.”

“D-Don’t you think I know that...? Let it go, already.”

If anyone else had taken that tone with Dona, their head would have left their shoulders on the spot. Since Shrimp was aware of Dona’s affection for him, he chose to give his uncle advice, or even reprimand him at times. It never deterred Dona from adoring his nephew whatsoever. Of course, he was family. Dona would not have tolerated this from anyone else.

“To entertain you in your boredom, Uncle, I have gathered every musician in Holylight.” Shrimp snapped his finger, and numerous musicians paraded into the ballroom, playing a cheery tune. The grand entrance was reminiscent of the type of parties they were used to. The guests cheered at the pleasant surprise. “If that woman chooses to selfishly keep the music box to herself, we shall keep every musician in the country in our entourage, and rob the rest of Holylight of any other music!”

“Gra ha ha! What a good nephew you are! Even I would not have come up with this!” Dona guffawed, jiggling his fat body.

While Dona and Shrimp might be satisfied by this stunt, it only served as a massive inconvenience to the rest of the country. Dona was blissfully listening to the grand orchestra when he received a report from Azur. His expression immediately changed. “What...? She sent another caravan to the north...!?”

“It appears so, my Lord.” Azur maintained his usual non-expression as his master’s turned bright red with wrath.

“That filthy swine! I won’t stand for this!”

After her sister Buttersauce embarrassed him with the music box, the Madam was garnering support from the central noble wives at an alarming pace. The Butterfly sisters were no less than Dona’s arch-nemesis, hell-bent on blocking him from the position of ultimate rule that was rightfully owed to him. The

wrath of Dona, leader of the prestigious nobles, hushed the ballroom for a moment. Sensing the tide shift in an unwanted direction, Dona theatrically spread his arms wide and calmly called to the crowd.

“Excuse me, dear friends. Don’t let some trivial bad news ruin our delightful party. Please, everyone, continue enjoying yourselves.”

Catching on, Shrimp gestured to the musicians, moving his hands like a conductor. Instantly, the musicians returned to playing their music, restoring the cheerful atmosphere to the party.

“Uncle...”

“The older sister made the first move. I’m leaving you in charge here, Shrimp.”

“Yes, Uncle. Please be careful.”

“I will...”

“Now, everyone! Let us continue to sing praise of our courageous ancestors with drink and merriment!”

At Shrimp’s call, fists were tossed into the air throughout the crowd, and the guests returned to excited conversation. Dona exited the ballroom, with Azur in tow, at a calm pace, at least in appearance.

The second Dona made it into his room, he slammed his fist on his desk, baring his rage. “What is going on, Azur!? What is that woman’s angle!?”

His patience seemed to have run out for those sisters.

“I am more concerned about the man who headed north ahead of the caravan,” Azur countered.

The music box, despite Dona’s obsession, did not concern Azur. In fact, Azur knew they had to concentrate on the man who called himself the Demon Lord, more than the movements of the sisters. In the near future, Azur was convinced that the man would become a terrible threat that would come straight for them.

“North...? Yes, that man!” Dona recalled that he was the man who put the music box up for auction, as well as the patron of the third Holy Maiden. To

Dona, who deemed himself the noblest of nobles, this 'Demon Lord' was nothing more than an insect crawling in the mud. Still, he wouldn't ignore the man's mysterious possessions. "Perhaps he will return with his pockets full of bizarre merchandise...? I knew it, that hog! She fears a rematch against me in the auction house, and turned to obtain more rarities from a foreign source."

Azur recognized his master's ridiculous delusions, of course, but he couldn't shatter Dona's illusion too recklessly, lest he grew uncontrollably stubborn.

"One sister after another... Those hogs will rue the day they dared to deceive me...!"

Dona was convinced that the infamous rift between the Butterfly sisters was nothing more than a ruse, and that they were secretly in cahoots. Anyone who had a grudge or was unhappy with one sister went to the other sister for support. And so, Dona imagined, that the sisters gathered intel from both ends so they could spin conflicts to their liking. In fact, this was not an unusual form of reconnaissance throughout history. In feudal Japan, there were examples of brothers faking a feud between them so the younger brother could gather opinions from his brother's men that had something negative to say about their leader, and prosecute them later on. Protecting a clan required much sacrifice, no matter the time or world.

(He's made up his mind. He won't see another 'truth' now...) Azur couldn't discern the actual truth about this, either. On one hand, he thought that the sisters' rift seemed genuine, but he believed that nobles of their status could easily pull off an act like that.

"Sir, you would be breaking the treaty."

"You were the one who told me to look northward!"

Azur did start this, which made even him show a slight frown on his brow. It was also true that he was concerned about the man who had gone north. Of course, he wasn't concerned about a music box or any other rarity, but the Demon Lord's intention behind this expedition.

Seeing Azur silently agree with him, Dona shook his gut and dramatically twiddled his beard. "Azur. I am only commanding you to watch those sisters for any dangerous activity. This is merely an affair within our country. They have no

say in this.”

“Yes, sir...!” Azur was sure that such a tactless excuse wouldn’t fly with the organization he was talking about, but never defied his master. He left the room. Stay any longer, and he only would have been saddled with more nonsensical demands.

——An underground Satanist temple.

“A Holy Maiden, you say...” Utopia, overseer of the Satanists, grinned at the report. Their previous attack on the Holy City had ended in failure, but he now saw a now-or-never opportunity. “Garcia, go and eliminate the Holy Maiden. And take *a few* with you.”

A man with a fearsome face eagerly rose at his call. He was an exceptionally vicious man, so much so that he was disliked even among fellow terrorists.

“Any stipulations on the location of the attack?” he asked.

“None. I’ll leave it up to your discretion.”

“Heh heh... This is going to be good.” Garcia chuckled with contentment and left the temple.

As the remaining Satanists followed suit, Warlkin alone remained with Utopia.

“Master Utopia,” he spoke out with uncertainty. “That man is a well-known criminal, not suited for activity outside of the country.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“Then why...?”

“The people of Holylight alone will not be enough to awaken Tartarus.”

Warlkin opened his mouth to respond, only to jump at a dark shadow which suddenly appeared from behind Utopia. The demonic silhouette whispered something into Utopia’s ear and sank back into his shadow.

Utopia turned back to Warlkin. “No need for concern. It’s only a familiar.”

“U-Understood...”

“I have an errand to run. I’ll leave you in charge of the rest, Warlkin.”

“...Yes, Master.”

Utopia produced a giant mirror and disappeared into it. Warlkin contemplated for a long time, having witnessed Utopia’s mysterious power. He gave up on trying to reason the unthinkable, and left the temple without another word. The Satanist organization had taken a massive hit from the attack on the Holy City, and Warlkin estimated that they needed a lot more time to rebuild.

(Where is our organization headed to...?) Warlkin had devoted his life to Satanism, owing to his dissatisfaction with the current state of Holylight and loathing for the rotten ruling class. However, all the organization had done so far was massacre and destroy. The victims of such acts were seldom the nobles, but the powerless common folk. While Warlkin had personally aimed to take down the Holy Maidens and nobles during his time with the Satanists, he had seen no glimpse of reconstruction nor hope for the future in the senseless destruction, no matter how long he waited.

(Am I truly on the righteous path...?) Warlkin produced a locket from his pocket and opened it. It contained a lock of flaxen hair, as vibrant as it probably ever was when still attached. For a few moments, Warlkin stared at the keepsake lock. (Is Daddy making a big mistake...?) His daughter had departed to the heavens at a young age from starvation and illness. She had always loved the fairytale about the island that floated above the clouds. Warlkin’s pride and joy. He had done everything in his power for the medicine his daughter needed, but it was much, much too expensive for a lowly worker like him. With no blessing nor miracle of any angel, death came and took his daughter with anticlimactic ease. (I wonder what you think of Daddy now...) No matter how long he stared at it, Warlkin’s locket never gave him an answer. Feeling the emptiness grow within his heart, Warlkin walked out of the temple, without a shred of hope in sight.

——Allit’s manor, Hellion territory.

Allit was deep in thought, sipping on a glass of wine in the picturesque garden of his manor. A mirror appeared before him, and Utopia emerged from it.

“It’s been too long, Allit.”

“I’m not in the mood. Beat it.”

Utopia chuckled in amusement. Instantly, his head flew off of his shoulders. “This brutish attitude doesn’t become you.” Utopia simply picked up his severed head and placed it back on his neck, as if it was nothing more than a detachable part of an action figure. “I wanted to apologize for our embarrassing display the other day. Of course, even I didn’t imagine that the Duke of Darkness himself would come out to play... Aha ha ha...!”

Allit contemplated tearing Utopia limb from limb, before reconsidering and continuing to silently sip his wine. He was just dealing with an animated puppet, after all. No violent outbursts would affect Utopia in the slightest.

“We were going to use three Satanic Crosses,” Utopia continued, “if it wasn’t for that little unexpected interruption.”

“...Wouldn’t have changed a thing,” Allit spat out somewhat monotone.

He knew that being emotional would only burn him hotter with shame, and that *thirteen* Satanic Crosses would not have made a difference in the face of the Dragonborn.

“I appreciate your collected assessment, Duke of Darkness. The other fools could learn a thing or two from you.”

“Get to the point and be gone.”

“A man who calls himself the Demon Lord has infiltrated Animania.”

“So?”

“I’ve come to believe that everything became misaligned following his appearance...”

Utopia was correct. If the Demon Lord had never come into this world, everything would have gone according to his plan. The resurrection of the King of Devils, firstly. That alone was supposed to decimate the entirety of eastern Holylight. Much to their surprise, the rumor was that the deity was killed by a man claiming to be the Demon Lord. Then there was the assassination attempt of the Holy Maidens. This, too, would have been a success without the

intervention of the Dragonborn. The drastically weakened Holylight was going to be decimated by the final blow: the attack on the Holy City. Forcing the remaining Holy Maiden to lock herself in the castle, they would have trampled all over the Holy City. However, even that attack was thwarted by the unexpected appearances of the Demon Lord and the Dragonborn.

Utopia *wished* he could actually laugh it off, but their situation was beyond that. “What do you make of all this, Allit?” he asked.

After listening to Utopia’s logical summary of the events so far and taking a large sip of his wine, Allit concluded that this was no coincidence. “They both appeared at the same time...? No, you think they’re one and the same...?”

Utopia confirmed this presumption and gave Allit a round of applause, as if he were an opponent he had just bested in a sports match. It was a conclusion he had drawn from the painful defeats he had experienced so far. “Do you want to look into it, Allit?”

Ordinarily, Allit would have told Utopia to do his own dirty work. However, Allit would not have been satisfied even if he could kill the dragon a hundred times over. He was dead-set on hunting his foe himself. “The dragon’s mine. Keep your hands off of it.”

“As you wish,” Utopia smiled. “All I want is for the pesky interruptions to end.”

Allit knew that he was being played, but had no choice but to cooperate. He was convinced that the agony that ate away at his entire body would not go away until he killed the dragon.

“By the way, how is Kale?” Utopia shifted the subject.

“Beats me.”

“My, my... We don’t have many of our kind left in this world. We have to be nice to each other.”

Allit scoffed and rang a bell to have more wine brought out. Immediately, a girl clad in a French maid’s outfit delivered a bottle of chilled wine. She seemed to have learned her lesson from last time, and left with a curtsy without saying a word.

After returning to the manor, the girl began cleaning the windows with sincere dedication. Utopia watched her as she tripped over herself from time to time, even knocking over a wooden bucket of water onto the hallway.

“How heartwarming. With a body like that... You have exquisite taste.”

“Don’t look at it, you filth. That’s my toy.”

“Oh, excuse me. I didn’t mean to make you angry... Aha ha ha...” After laughing for a while, Utopia continued, melodramatically. “You’re not being very nice to me, either. You haven’t asked a single thing about *my* life.”

“Not interested.”

“Is that all you have to say for one of your kin, single-handedly fighting against the humans with all of his might...? How cruel of you.”

Allit, Kale, and Utopia were the three Hellions who were exceptionally uninterested in the power struggle within Hellion territory, and lived their lives free-spiritedly. While Allit remained in his manor for the most part, he did show up during conflicts in the human realm occasionally. Kale always made bigger messes out of any situation, not acting on any particular philosophy. Utopia traveled to the human realm in order to organize and rot their world from the inside out.

“Humans will continue to wage war against each other. Tartarus should wake before long.” With that, Utopia turned to leave.

“Watch your back, Utopia.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

Allit had called out in mockery rather than concern. He had the urge to get a word in edgewise with Utopia, who had always manipulated and controlled everyone around him.

“I heard there was an unprecedented horde out of Bastille.”

“So it seems.”

“A schemer often schemes their own demise.”

“...Get to your point,” Utopia urged, his impatience growing.

In part, Utopia was surprised at how much Allit was keeping up with the human realm.

“If you want something, seize it with your own hands.”

“Working smarter and not harder is my style.” Utopia disappeared into the mirror.

Allit returned to sipping his wine and swirling it in the glass, savoring the aroma as if Utopia had never been there to begin with. He appeared more noble than any human, exuding a dark, unapproachable aura.

—Near the border of Holylight.

In the dead of night, while even the grass on the ground slept soundly, two shadows were clashing silently. One was Hanzo, her katana in hand, and the other was Azur, manipulating his steel wire like it was coming to life. With both parties intentionally silencing themselves, the only traces of their battle were the faint sparks in the darkness of night. From afar, one might have mistaken them for the gentle lights of fireflies.

“I told you not to return north, Azur.”

“It’s not my choice, but my master has—”

“Die.”

Countless *shuriken* flew from Hanzo’s hand, which Azur knocked to the ground in one fluid and graceful motion with a whip of his wire.

“I have no intention of interfering with Xenobia,” Azur said. “Won’t you at least hear my side of the story?”

“No.”

At Hanzo’s refusal to any attempt at discourse, Azur finally scowled and turned to flee. As a long-time assassin in the Northern Nations, Azur had been in a life-or-death standoff with Hanzo, a fellow inhabitant of the underground, several times before.

“To tell you the truth, I never want your organization on my tail again,” Azur confessed with genuine exasperation as he watched for an opportunity to

escape.

This was no act. After eliminating a few important figures of Xenobia, Azur had become wanted by Hanzo's group. Their cat-and-mouse battles and chases felt endless, until Azur finally felt cornered enough that he made his way into Holylight. Their chase had concluded with Dona hearing about Azur from an underground tip broker and taking him in, perhaps in an attempt to expand his reach.

"You stay in that little playpen and never come out of Holylight. That was the deal," Hanzo snarled.

She had struggled to capture Azur, who had proved himself an extremely deadly individual, until she was forced to strike a deal. In part, this was because her organization handled many tasks, and couldn't afford to spend too much time in pursuit of a single target.

"It's all to protect my place in this world." Steadying his breath, Azur turned to Hanzo in a flawless gesture.

Ever since the emergence of the Demon Lord, Azur felt like his place in the world, the metaphorical cliff he was standing on, was being carved out beneath him. What's worse was he didn't know how far he would fall once he lost his footing. To Azur, who had survived countless brushes with death in the past, this was an extraordinary circumstance.

"You mean your slave driver — Dona, was it? — is in danger?"

"I think you know who *the Demon Lord* is..."

With that, Hanzo's concentration broke for an instant. Azur seized that moment to slap a rune sticker on each foot and spring off in the opposite direction.

"You little...!"

"I intend to keep my promise to you, Lady Hanzo."

"My name is Sayane!"

"You changed your name again...?"

In spite of Hanzo's desperate pursuit, Azur began to put distance between

them. The rune stickers he had used were imbued with the power of **Gust Boots**, an extremely rare item crafted by a high-ranking Spell Caster over the course of several months. Once Azur had equipped these, not even Hanzo could keep up with him.

“I’ll be back soon,” Azur called back. “Until then, *au revoir*, Lady Hanzo...”

“Who’re you calling Hanzo!? It’s Natsuki!”

“How do you expect anyone to keep up with all your name changes...?” Azur muttered to himself and picked up even more speed.

Unbeknownst to a certain Demon Lord, the north was entering a period of growing chaos.

The Hidden Lair Classroom

The Demon Lord was walking through the forest with Olgan, their mood significantly dampened. As Olgan revealed one fact after another about her father to the Demon Lord, even he became gradually depressed. In fact, he never enjoyed hopeless sob stories.

My mother was tortured to death after she had me. I spent my childhood as one of the subjects of his experiments.

I see...

I was sliced and diced with all sorts of blades, my bones crushed with brute force. I’ve been set on fire and practically frozen solid. After that, he showered me with spells of each element, meticulously documenting my body’s healing process.

As Olgan continued describing these things in her monotone voice, color slowly drained from the Demon Lord’s face. He imagined that not even the most pandering of gore films would go that cliché.

For food, I was given scraps that dogs wouldn’t eat. In hindsight, those meals weren’t too bad. With some stroke of genius, he decided to put a small dose of poison in my food.

O-Oh...?

Experimenting with my immunity, or something. The dose increased by the day, until—

Having heard enough, the Demon Lord stopped in his tracks and clapped his hands together.

Wh-Why don't we take a break around here!

Truth be told, he wanted to research the forest some more, but he had to clear the air, somehow. Strolling while listening to Olgan's never-ending torture diary seemed nothing short of a cruel punishment.

A break? There's nothing here.

Don't worry. I have just the Base for a short break.

Olgan crooked her neck at the mention of a 'base.' She wondered what the Demon Lord could do, so deep in the woods.

(Now, on today's menu...)

The Demon Lord reached into the black void and produced a Survival Pack and a Defense Pack before combining them into a base. Olgan's eyes widened as a house-like construction suddenly materialized before her.

Wh-What is this...!? A spell of old!?

Hold your applause, just yet. The Demon Lord produced three Reinforcement Materials, which improved the durability of a base, and combined them one after another. Finally, the Demon Lord produced the most important ingredient of his construction, Aluminum Sap. Once that item was sucked into the structure, it drastically changed its form.

"Improve Base... Behold! **Secret Lair.**"

The base let out a bright flash and underwent a metamorphosis. A cloud of vines covered the building until it blended into the rocks and trees around it. In the Game, this base drastically reduced the encounter rate with enemies. In order to elevate the Secret Lair even further, players had to continuously improve its durability and acquire Titanium Alloy. Then players would have Nature's Fortress: a base that exterminated any unwanted guests. That was one of the few bases that, even in the cutthroat arena of the Game, allowed players

to safely catch their breath.

There. Now we can rest and relax.

W-Wait a minute... What is this!? Is this the power of the Fallen Angel!?

Something like that. Come on, let's go in. The Demon Lord brushed Olgan off, too lazy to fully explain.

He entered the base through a door. Olgan watched him for a few moments before carefully following.

The Secret Lair, unlike most other bases, was jam-packed with all the essentials of rough and tough men. A hammock was hung up near the camping cot, and a cypress bathtub was placed on the other side of the room beyond a partition. Considering that there was no more than an oil drum for a bath in its previous iteration, this was a significant improvement. A campfire burned in the center of the room, despite there being a fireplace on the wall. There was a wooden shelf with numerous dishes and mugs. Climb up the makeshift ladder of vines, and there was also a spacious loft above them.

"You can talk out loud now. And show yourself," the Demon Lord declared cheerfully and fully relieved.

"There's a lot of room in here..." Olgan managed to squeeze out.

She had no idea what else to say.

"You can get to the attic through the loft," the Demon Lord pointed out, "where you can stargaze. There's a small igloo bath out in the yard, too."

Olgan peered out of the window to find a stone igloo, filled with steam.

"What's going on...? How did you...?"

"Dammit, there's nothing in the snack corner...! What the hell!? I was looking forward to some Grinples and Lack Jink's..." The Demon Lord grumbled, walking around the base to inspect its contents. Olgan's shocked mutters were falling on deaf ears. "The mess tin and the lantern are here. Tent, grill, and charcoal... but no bike!?" The Demon Lord checked one thing after another, and either grinned in satisfaction or shouted in despair. He couldn't stand that even a single detail was missing from his creation. This man had always strived to

create a complete world of his own, through and through. “They will rue the day... When my world will...!”

The sight of the Demon Lord trembling in wrath, with a beat-up mess tin in hand, seemed terrifying yet somehow comical.

Olgan let out an exasperated sigh. “The real problem is that the Anima will surely notice a building of this size.”

“Not a chance,” the Demon Lord countered without a care. “One has to learn numerous detection skills and specialize in that skill tree to spot a Secret Lair. It’s perfectly soundproof, too.”

“Not sure what all of that meant, but you sure seem confident in it...” That much was clear to Olgan, too. She simply didn’t know what to say about the mysterious structure that had sprung up in an instant.

“We’re done for the night, in any case. Make yourself at home.” The Demon Lord chucked charcoal into the campfire, stoking the flames.

Olgan watched him with curiosity. “How brutish... Well, perhaps that’s the definition of a Demon Lord...”

“Hm? What do you mean by ‘brutish?’”

“The charcoal. It’s contraband in the human world, isn’t it?”

“...What in the world are you talking about?”

“Why are you looking at me like *I’m* the ignorant one!?”

The Demon Lord had no way of knowing that charcoal was treated as contraband throughout the continent. As the nations continued to wage war against one another, lumber was a necessity not only for houses and day-to-day tools, but for building fortresses and base camps. On the other hand, trees took decades, and sometimes even centuries, to grow. They couldn’t afford for anyone to fell them as they wanted. Historically, unsanctioned felling had always brought lumber shortages, much to everyone’s detriment. With that kind of history, wasting wood by burning a fire with it was considered to be of unthinkable savagery. Those who dared to fell and burn lumber without permits were usually outlaws like bandits or burglars. To prevent these criminals from

wasting natural resources, all countries on the continent furiously persecuted tree poachers. While some desperately poor people had tried to make a living out of gathering fallen branches to sell, most barely collected enough to supply their own household, let alone sell.

(Charcoal's a regulated commodity, huh...?) The Demon Lord secretly smirked as Olgan explained the reasoning behind the regulations. (This is good.) Contrabands always tended to be lucrative. They weren't talking about hardcore drugs or anything, so the Demon Lord would feel no remorse no matter how much charcoal he sold or flooded the market with. In fact, he had been hesitant in dealing with the unfamiliar Fire Spell Stones.

"All that fuss for charcoal? What about coal or oil? I don't expect there to be any electricity, but..."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but by 'coal,' do you mean black stone?"

"I-I guess you could call it a black stone..."

"Black stone is a lost treasure. There aren't any of them left in the entire continent."

"Treasure? Lost?"

"...I don't know how things were back in your days, but black stones have long been mined dry. And before you ask, they've been mined-out in Hellion territory, too."

"Hm... Mined dry, you say. How interesting."

"Wh-What are you talking about...?" Olgan leaned back at the Demon Lord's peculiar response. She had hoped for him to react to the *back in your days* part she had snuck into the sentence, but he seemed to remain completely oblivious to the implication.

(Olgan... She seems like she knows her stuff...)

The Demon Lord, on the other hand, was thoroughly enjoying their conversation. All of the women he had met in this world so far had been, for better and worse, all energetic and talkative. It was a rare occurrence that he

could hold a calm and collected conversation with someone.

“It sounds like you know a lot about history, Olgan. How old are you, anyway?”

“Me? Four-hundred-and-something, but I stopped counting.”

“Four hundred...?”

“Don’t act surprised. According to legends, you should be over ten thousand years old.”

(Do I *look* ten thousand years old!?) The Demon Lord somehow managed to keep his reaction silent. He was beginning to notice that their conversation went more smoothly if he didn’t correct Olgan on her impression of him. (Demon Lord, ‘Fallen Angel...’ Whatever. I could switch between them.) The Demon Lord seemed to feel no guilt for lying, showing his true colors as a natural-born fraud.

“In any case,” he said, “let’s rinse off. You should try that cypress bath right there. I’ll take the igloo bath outside.” He walked out into the yard with pep in his step. Nowadays, an igloo bath wasn’t easy to come by in Japan.

The Demon Lord stripped away his clothes without hesitation, and began rinsing off with the bucket attached to the igloo. The perfectly heated water elicited a satisfied groan from him. The water of this bath induced the feeling of a ‘job well done.’ The small handcrafted cypress bath inside was designed to imbue its user with rural luxury, away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

“Doesn’t get any better than this... I deserve a little RnR.” The Demon Lord generated a bottle of sake and a cup, pouring a generous portion before throwing it back. “Ah... That’s the stuff! Today was sure productive!” With a joyful chuckle, the Demon Lord held up his cup to the moon, as if to toast it. ‘Productivity,’ in his case, meant just strolling through the woods and firing off the uncontrollable nuclear warhead that was Akane to send Animania into chaos, but the Demon Lord had squarely considered it a day full of hard work. “It’s been work, work, work these past few days, but I could get used to this sense of accomplishment. I deserve to treat myself some more.” He rambled on, elated from the bath-induced sense of achievement. The Demon Lord spent some more SP to produce some Scallops. A Scallop healed the user’s Stamina by

25 in the Game, but wasn't too popular due to the fact that a single Scallop ate up an inventory slot. "Mm. Goes great with wasabi and soy sauce. Now I could *really* use some chilled tofu... That's more SP, but oh well. Tomorrow only comes for those who live today to the fullest." While he acted like sloth incarnate, he furthered his daydreaming to justify his indulgences. (Remember the wise words of the foreman of Squad E... Don't skimp on treating yourself.)

Just as the Demon Lord was about to indulge himself further, he was interrupted by Tahara's Communication, notifying him of Luna's departure with the Madam's caravan.

I let it slide, just like you said. Are you gonna take care of the rest, Mister Secretary?

Indeed. You can leave it to me.

Ordinarily, the Demon Lord would have been completely astounded by such news, but soaking up to his neck in an exquisite bath and his sense of accomplishment allowed him to confidently fake a promise. His tone, even his posture, was as relaxed and confident as ever. Anyone would have believed that everything was going according to his plan.

Then I'll just sit back and wait for the good news, sir. Feel sorry for anyone in your path, though. It does look like he wants us to clash with this 'Tzardom of Light.'

Tahara had researched the state of the countries outside of Holylight, and had found the answer in no time. While he had numerous strategies to choose from, he was leaving his boss with the choice. This was mostly because of the eerily mysterious paladin in the Tzardom.

He was from the Tzardom of light... The Demon Lord muttered, mostly to himself. He recalled the paladin, a hero, who fed the poor with his own two hands.

...Oh, you two've already met.

Only by coincidence.

Heh! Coincidence, huh...? Funny thing, isn't it?

Indeed.

Piece after piece fell into place inside Tahara's mind. His little grey cells were about to make a connection to something far beyond... While the Demon Lord was oblivious, drunk with sake and the comfortable sense of fulfillment. Even as they spoke, he gleefully sipped on his drink. Of course, Tahara only took his boss' elation to mean that everything was going according to his plan.

Nonchalantly, the Demon Lord dropped a bomb. *I should have told you earlier, but I summoned Akane.*

...All right. Tahara answered, short but sharply. While it wasn't what he had expected, Tahara understood Akane to be the vaccine to the unknown. The solution to Xenobia. Akane had an ability called 'Special Agent' that allowed her to act as a ninja. Tahara couldn't help but feel rushed by the Demon Lord already shifting his focus outside of Holylight. *I feel funny saying this to you, of all people, but... Don't get too ahead of us, sir. The rest of us are already struggling to keep up with your master plan.* With a chuckle, Tahara ended the Communication that only worsened their gap in understanding.

The Demon Lord chuckled, audibly buzzed, and tossed a scallop into his mouth. "Ha! As if you're 'one of them,' Tahara. I made you to be a genius. Oh, right. I should shoot Luna a call, too."

Take your time and stay out of trouble, he commanded with confident condescension to Luna, all the while not understanding a thing about what was really happening around him. A man's sense of accomplishment, generated by the igloo bath in this case, was a powerful force. Without achieving a single thing, the Demon Lord felt like he had completed a major project. Literally, he was nearly drowned by his own design.

"Now what to do for dinner... Maybe I'll go look for something in the woods." The Demon Lord laughed, as if he was on a weekend camping trip, and stepped out of the bath.

He returned inside the base to find Olgan with blushing cheeks. She seemed to have enjoyed the luxurious cypress bath. She was no longer wearing her usual head-to-toe cape, and appeared relaxed. The slightly sharp tips of her ears peeked through her long hair to signify that she was, indeed, of a different

species than humans.

“...It’s been a while since I’ve felt this relaxed. Thanks,” Olgan spoke up, a little embarrassed.

“Mm. Good to hear.”

The Demon Lord, too, could not have been happier in seeing another satisfied customer of his creation. When it came to things like this, he acted like a man-child.

(Wait. She’s wearing...)

Olgan was practically in her underwear.



With Olgan's petite stature, the Demon Lord imagined that he would have been sent straight to the slammer if a modern-day police officer happened upon this scene.

"W-We've set up kind of a camp here. Why don't we go look for food in the woods?" Averting his gaze, the Demon Lord hastened to get himself out of this situation. The incident with White in the Hot Springs Resort was still fresh in his memory.

"...You make me feel like we're not in the forest of Animania," Olgan muttered with exasperation, but decided to follow him anyway. She seemed to have learned that no voice of reason could reach this man's ears.

They each made themselves invisible once more and headed out into the woods. The sky above them had already darkened, and the countless firefly-like creatures around them created a mystical atmosphere.

Fireflies? They light up the place, at least... the Demon Lord Communicated.

A species of Woodland Fireflies. Some collectors will pay a good price for them, but they attack in swarms when threatened.

For some reason, people always like to collect bugs.

Enjoying the mystical light show, they traversed through the forest, each confident that they could deal with anything in their paths. Not many others on this continent could dare embark on a nightly stroll like this.

That looks like a mushroom. Is that an apple?

Hey, if you're not careful, you'll step in one of the... Olgan cut herself short, noticing that the Demon Lord was evading every last trap. While Olgan was using a magical item that detected low-level traps, the Demon Lord didn't look like he was using anything of the sort. *How can you tell where the traps are?*

Experience, I guess. It'd be easier if I had a Deactivate Trap skill, but...

Back in the game, the Demon Lord of the Empire would only be on the move during the final battle. At that point, traps were rendered useless. All he had to do was exterminate the enemy with overwhelming force.

The Demon Lord picked one piece of vegetation after another, asking Olgan if

they were edible before throwing them into his Item Folder. Names like Shadow Shroom and Spotted Apple appeared as he did. With his interest piqued by the unfamiliar names, the Demon Lord delved into gathering as many edible things as he could. Someone might have mistaken them for a father and daughter foraging for food at another place and time.

What's that shimmering plant over there, Olgan?

Delicious Grassius. They only grow in this forest. I hear the grass itself is a delicacy, but their fruit goes for quite the price.

Is that name some kind of joke?

Easy to remember, right? The problem is—

Whatever. If it's edible, I'll take it.

W-Wait! They scare really easily. If you get too close, they kill themselves.

Ha ha ha! Yeah, right! The Demon Lord cackled his way over to the vegetation, wondering if Olgan had a sense of humor after all. Instantly, some sort of telepathic voices, which sounded different from that of a Communication, flooded into his mind.

Woah! Here comes a dude in all black!

Goodbye, cruel world!

D-Don't eat me, LMFAO!

I'm gonna blaze myself!

We're not that kind of grass, dude.

Guess I'll die.

As the flood of thoughts subsided, the vegetation turned to ash before the Demon Lord's eyes. He was speechless as he watched this unfold. When he found his words again, he immediately snapped at Olgan. *Wh-What was that...!? Were those even plants!? Are they sentient!?*

It's unclear. All I know is that you have to render them 'unconscious' or trap them in an illusion before harvesting them. They go for a high price because of their secluded habitat and extreme difficulty of harvest.

Who the hell wants to eat those!? the Demon Lord cried out, breaking character.

After a few deep breaths, he expanded his search for foods. He found creeks, hills, and some sort of village in the distance. When he listened closely, he even heard the leaves of the trees rustling in the wind.

(There have to be some nocturnal beasts lurking around...)

The Demon Lord wasn't all that interested in the Anima up until this point, but the bizarre vegetation he had just encountered had sparked his curiosity in a different department.

You said that weird grass is sold for a high price. But Animania and the humans are in conflict, right?

That's right. So?

How is there trade between the two factions?

Who knows? There could be poachers that make their way in here, or some black market merchants. Beats me.

The Demon Lord imagined that his impression of Animania would turn one way or the other depending on whether or not the government had a part in the underground trading. Even in the modern world, it's not rare for nations in conflict to have some sort of trade deal behind closed doors.

The Demon Lord considered looking into the Anima who lived in the forest themselves. He couldn't deny the possibility that it would lead to unlocking another admin feature.

By the way, does it snow on that mountain over there? It's white all over.

Even after nightfall, the forest was not particularly cold. It seemed like the mountain he had pointed out existed in a different climate.

It's dangerous to approach that mountain, Olgan answered. *I can improve your view for a short while, though.*

Hm?

Olgan's tiny body began floating up into the air. Both her and Tron could

wield Flight, a class-2 Wind spell, without expending any Stamina.

Your coat's in the way. Can you move it?

A-All right...

Olgan wrapped her arms around the Demon Lord's waist and began pulling him up into the air. It felt like he was being lifted by an invisible elevator.

You're not going to drop me, are you...?

How incompetent do you think I am?

Don't drop me, all right. That's not a set-up, I swear. Not looking for a punchline.

What are you talking about?

Soon, the two emerged from the canopy of the thick woods out into the sky. The Demon Lord was breathless as he looked down on Animania and its vast forest. At the same time, he noticed that the mountain that had seemed far away from the ground was not snow-capped, but entirely covered by white snow. As he gazed down at the incredible sight, the Demon Lord lit the cigarette in his mouth.

(The forest I first found myself in was impressive, but this is something...!) The Demon Lord looked over the infinite forest below and realized that people in his world had less and less opportunities to interact with nature as they grew up. He was no exception, as he had remained long absent from any forest or mountain during his busy work schedule.

While the Demon Lord soaked in the wonder of nature, Olgan had a weird look on her face, her brows twisted on her forehead. (This is what the Demon Lord's... what Lucifer's body feels like...) Just from holding his torso, she could feel his immense muscles. 'Built like steel' almost didn't do it justice. While she hadn't paid much mind to his body while it was concealed by the long coat, now that she was embracing his body in her arms, she was beginning to see stars. (I've never felt such a forceful body before...) It didn't help that Olgan had lived a life distanced from any man.

Nearly panicking that Olgan had begun to waver in the air, the Demon Lord

managed to maintain a façade of tranquility as he called to her, to keep from startling her.

Relax, Olgan. Let's enjoy the view.

R-Right. Sorry...

Enjoying a smoke up in the sky... It's not too shabby.

The scent of tobacco gradually calmed Olgan down. She had only ever felt disgust for the smell of her father's cigar, but the smoke that the Demon Lord exhaled made her terribly serene. This was a natural reaction, since the Demon Lord's cigarette had no adverse effects to his health, but only restored his Stamina. Whenever he needed to buy time or began to panic, the Demon Lord would always light a cigarette.

What are those lights over there, Olgan?

Light Spell Stones... A group on patrol, I'm sure.

Numerous lights were swimming in the trees below, illuminating the forest. Shoving his cigarette into his portable ashtray, the Demon Lord made up his mind. He was ready to see an Anima with his own eyes.

Those are Anima, right? I want to see them.

I wouldn't. It's too dangerous.

For future reference. It's worth the risk.

Olgan relented at the Demon Lord's unwavering stance, and floated them both back to the ground.

The pair carefully approached a group of lights to find ape-hybrids taking a break. They looked straight out of the *Planet of the Apes* movies, with just as much hair on their bodies. The Demon Lord noticed one of them wearing a particularly flashy red outfit and pegged him as the leader. The presumed leader of the troop was nodding along to the whispers of the *kappa*-like man beside him.

This isn't good, Olgan Communicated. That's the leader of the ape-hybrids. And his advisor...

Hybrid? Leader?

He's Monkey Magic, one of the Animadmirals. I didn't expect him to show up so quickly.

Who's the kappa-looking one next to him?

Xiaoshou Baldibald. He's the Animadmiral's best advisor.

Setting aside all sorts of questions, the Demon Lord focused on watching the scene before them unfold. The leader seemed respected by all, the troop always moving in satisfying coordination. Like monkeys obeying their alpha, they seemed like an extremely disciplined group.

"We're not going to fall behind those ass-sniffing dogs, are we?" the leader called.

"No, sir!" the group answered in unison.

"Looks like we're dealing with targets that their noses *can't* sniff out, for once. We got a perfect opportunity on our hands."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

The Demon Lord crooked his neck at their obsession with dogs, but soon shook the ridiculous idea out of his head.

Unfortunately, Olgan spoke up to confirm it. *Apparently, the ape and dog-hybrids are always in competition with each other.*

(For real!?) The Demon Lord wanted to scream at how cliché it was. Just like in Eastern culture from the modern world, dogs and monkeys never seemed to get along.

"Boss, looking at the territory around here... Oh!" Just as one of the hench-apes laid out a paper to show something, it was blown away by a gust of wind and became tangled in a branch high above them.

As a few of the apes rushed to climb the tree, the kappa whispered something to the leader, who laughed in response. "Oh, you absolute simpletons... You've got to use what's up here," he said, pointing to his head. The leader picked up a stick and got the piece of paper out of the tree.

Instantly, all of the other ape-hybrids went wild.

“U-Using a stick to get something from all the way up there...? He’s an absolute genius...!”

“Monkey see, monkey do...!”

“It-It’s a revolution...! The boss did it again!”

The leader listened to the amazed comments of his hench-apes with pride, before taking another shocking action. Incredibly, he sat down on a nearby rock and began eating an apple.

“B-Boss... Why are you...?”

“You get it, do ya?” the leader asked with a taunting grin. “You never imagined it, did you...” He looked around at the confused faces in the troop before declaring something that would shock both the monkeys and the Demon Lord, albeit for different reasons. “It’s more comfortable to eat... if you sit down...!”

“N-No way!”

“G-Guys! It’s much more comfortable! Try it!”

“I never imagined there was such a clever and efficient way of eating...! Only an absolute genius could figure this out!”

“Boss monkey did, and us monkeys saw.”

The amazed reactions gradually shifted to cheering. On the other hand, the Demon Lord was completely blanking, and Olgan remained silent as the excitement only grew among the troop of monkeys.

With a perverted grimace, the kappa called out to the group. “Gheh! Calm down, everyone... Try taking deep breaths.”

“‘D-Deep’ breaths...?”

“Gheh. That’s right. Slowly breathe in as much air as you can, then breathe it out.”

“W-Woah... I feel stronger already!”

“Boss doesn’t keep you around for nothing, Sir Baldibald!”

“Bald! Bald! Bald!” They chanted in unison.

“D-Don’t call me bald, I’m Xiaoshou!”

The Demon Lord remained absolutely dumbfounded. He couldn’t even tell if they were serious or jesting.

Are they doing some kind of skit? he Communicated to Olgan. Or are they trying to throw us off?

I-I have heard that ape-hybrids can get easily carried away...

It’s like they’re training for the Olympics of stupid.

They’re formidable... in combat...

The more she tried to explain, the more embarrassed Olgan became. There was no defending the dignity of the ape-hybrids after overhearing that series of conversations.

“All right, break’s over. We’re gonna catch those intruders before those dogs do. Follow me, boys!”

“Yes, sir!” The crowd ran after their boss.

Soon, the leader and the kappa who were leading the troop tripped on something and fell flat on their faces. They seemed to have been caught in one of the traps set out throughout the forest.

“B-Boss!”

“Don’t worry about me... Keep going...!”

“Are you hurt, Sir Baldibald!?”

“I’m not bald... It’s a water bowl... Gheh...”

Both the leader and the kappa pointed ahead of them, still fallen on the ground. The rest of the monkeys went wild, moved by the selfless display of their leaders.

“We won’t let you die in vain, Boss!”

“Run as fast as you can...! In the direction of Sir Baldibald’s point... to the morning sun!”

“Bald! Bald! Bald!” The apes chanted like it was some sort of password, running off into the forest.

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Xiaoshou!?”

Once the commotion of the troop faded out, their Boss faltered to his feet, and pulled up the kappa.

“Ugh, those hench-apes of mine...” said Monkey Magic.

“You gotta teach them better than that. There’s no use no matter what I say.”

“You got ‘bald’ in your name and no hair on your head. Can you blame them?”

“And you too... I told you to forget that old name of mine.”

As the pair patted off the pieces of grass on their clothes, the Demon Lord silently came out of his Stealth Stance. Olgan was shocked by the decision, but decided to not intervene.

“Wh-Who are you...!?”

“I just want to ask you a few questions, and apologize for the commotion.”

“Gheh... You’re *the* intruder?”

“More or less. First thing’s first, I bear no animosity towards you or your country.”

The kappa, while still on guard, decided to hear the Demon Lord out after hearing his collected tone. On the other hand, Monkey Magic’s face turned bright red. As if he was ready to attack the Demon Lord at the drop of a hat, he used his tail to push himself up onto his feet.

“Who do you think you are, human...? I’ll put you back in your place!”

“Gheh. Come on, now. Won’t hurt to hear him out.”

The leader of the apes drew the staff from his back and spun it round and round like a circus act. The Demon Lord had no way of knowing that the staff was Jingu Bang, a weapon that could stretch and shrink to any size and deliver special attacks.

“Taste the prized artifacts of the apes... Go, Jingu Bang!”

With the swing of the monkey's hand, his staff stretched as long as a spear, and struck the Demon Lord's shoulder. His long coat fluttered ever so slightly. The Demon Lord calmly observed the staff that touched his shoulder, before his eyes began to glare with hellfire.

(Why didn't that trigger Assault Queller? Is it a form of magic...?)

The Demon Lord had only felt a minute amount of damage. He would have guessed 5, which was incredibly accurate. Jingu Bang had an effect to deal 5 piercing damage, a 'loaded attack' as the inhabitants of this world called it. No matter what armor or magic one used to protect themselves, a loaded attack always dealt damage. Jingu Bang was a One-of-a-Kind with that extremely powerful effect.

Olgan, who had been quietly watching, Communicated to the Demon Lord. *You're facing off against one of the infamous Animadmirals. Need a hand?*

There's something I want to try. Hold the other one back for me, if need be.

...All right.

The Demon Lord seemed to decide that, even if something unexpected were to happen, he could trust Olgan to bail them out. On the other hand, Olgan was quite unnerved by the Demon Lord's surprising reaction. She had expected a definitive 'no.'

Monkey Magic went in for another attack. "Hmph! Fear got your tongue? Big talk is all you humans got, anyway!"

Swinging Jingu Bang in all directions, he dealt three more blows to the Demon Lord. The leader of the apes showed a victorious grin at first, which became tainted with doubt. He wondered how a mere human could withstand so many blows, and loaded attacks, no less. Eventually, the Demon Lord took his eyes off of the ground. The moment they met the eyes of Monkey Magic, the leader of the apes gazed into Hell, every last strand of his fur standing on its end. Reflexively, he called into the forest to call for his troop. He couldn't tell whether his hench-apes would return in time.

"S-Something's not right with this guy... You gotta gather your chimps to... Gheh!"

A red beam zapped by the kappa's feet just as he tried to turn around. He looked up to find Olgan, a magic circle floating around her.

"Gheh!? Y-You're Belp—"

"Flame Wall."

A wall of flames erupted beside the kappa, completely separating him from Monkey Magic.

"Gheh! My bowl... head bowl's... drying up!"

Fearing that the bowl on his head would go completely dry, the kappa fled into the woods. The Animadmiral was on his own.

The leader of the apes didn't seem to even notice Olgan's appearance. "Wh-What are you...? H-How can you... be standing... after..."

His teeth rattled and his body froze. Something deep within his core was screaming that he was facing mortal danger.

"Interesting toy, but you won't take me down with that stick, even if you spent a thousand years doing it..."

Kunai, the Demon Lord of the Empire, boasted an astronomical HP of 40,000, allowing him to serve as the game's final boss. As the Demon Lord took a step forward, Monkey Magic used his tail like a spring and leapt into the air. He knew that this next attack was do-or-die.

"I'll show you my true strength! *Hwa-a-a-a-a!*"

—**Double Down!** (Expend the user's HP to boost damage.)

—**Monkey Do!** (Delivers another set of Chain Attacks.)

Activating all skills available to him, Monkey Magic swung his best possible attack down at the Demon Lord. Mercilessly, the attack was deflected by Assault Queller, accompanied by a cold *ping*. The leader of the apes widened his eyes in confusion.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord stroked his chin in contemplation. "Hm... Apparently, that staff only generates piercing damage when you use it on its own as a Normal Attack. Didn't work out that you threw on some extraneous

skills and Chain Attacks.”

“Why the... *Hwa-a-a-a-a!*” the monkey cried, furiously scratching his head.

“Considering the risk of having it destroyed or stolen from you, you shouldn’t rely so heavily on your weapon.” The Demon Lord approached the Animadmiral in an instant. The ape had nowhere to run. “That was an interesting experience, but you should really understand the properties of your own equipment... Baldibald, was it?”

“No! My name’s Monkey Magic!”

“And you were with a kappa, too... What is this, Journey to the West? It’s worth a shot.”

With that, the Demon Lord stuck his hand into the black void and produced a piece of armor. Kinkoji, a Novice item. It was a piece of armor meant to protect the head, but only had a boost of 2, just like the Angel’s Ring he had given to White. It was modeled after the circlet used in Journey to the West to bound Sun Wukong.

(No one gave this thing a second look in the arena, but...)

In *Journey to the West*, Tang Sanzang tightened it on Sun Wukong’s head, using it to control the free-spirited monkey.

“We’re going to cause a lot of commotion in this country for a short while, but we bear no ill intention. If you are indeed the magical monkey, I want you to go to Gandhara and spread that news.” Spewing references from the Chinese epic, the Demon Lord attached the Kinkoji to the monkey’s head. Just as he uttered “constrict,” Monkey Magic cried out in pain, his face turned bright red. The half-hearted backstory the Demon Lord had given the item to ‘tighten on the head of misbehaving monkeys’ came to life. After watching the ape writhe on the ground in agony for a while, he quietly muttered: “stop.”

“*Wah...ah?*” Monkey Magic halted.

“All right, tight again.”

“*Wah-a-a-a-a!* Stop it, you puny human! Us apes are the wizards of the forest —”

“Green lights ahead, no stop sign in sight...”

“W-Wait! Stop it, please! How can a human—”

“Hm... Are you trying to do the ‘how long will it take for my skull to crush’ challenge?” The Demon Lord’s brazenness didn’t stop with the overt defiance of any modern-day animal rights activism. He picked Jingu Bang up off the ground and stored it into his Item Folder without a word, most likely to analyze it later.

“Y-You thief...! Give that back...! It’s mine!”

“How dare you. I didn’t steal it. I’m just going to borrow it, maybe forever.”

“That’s the definition of... *Wah-a-a-a-a!*”

“Stop. Tighten. St-tight. Stight. St-st-st...”

“*Wah-a-a-a-a-a!* I can’t take it anymore!”

Ignoring any cries of pain, the Demon Lord continued his noble Kinkoji experiment. His vile ruthlessness was totally becoming of his status as the Demon Lord. It was a comical sight to watch, but it was anything but for the leader of the apes.

“Don’t worry. Do what I say, and I’ll give it back.”

“R-Really...?” Monkey Magic asked, tears in his eyes.

Unbeknownst to him, he was only sinking further in the bottomless pit of quicksand.

“Of course. But you know what that means, don’t you...?” The Demon Lord’s evil taunt drained the color from the monkey’s face. He shuddered to imagine the Demon Lord’s demand. “I’ll give more orders later. Stay out of our way until then.” He turned towards the woods. “So *you’re* Baldibald, right?”

“M-Mister Shadow, name’s Xiaoshou. It’s a bowl, I swear. I’m not bald.”

“We’ll leave that to the historians to decide, but—”

“It’s not an abstract concept up for debate! I’m! Not! Bald!”

“Save it for the judge.”

“What judge!?”

“Just stay out of the way, all right? We’ll disappear when the time is right.”

“H-Hey, Mister. What are you trying to... Gheh!? He disappeared...”

The Demon Lord had returned to Stealth Stance, and Olgan had made herself invisible again with magic. In hindsight, the whole kerfuffle seemed like grown adults picking on children to her. The Demon Lord turned to her with a rejuvenated expression, as if he had just concluded a friendly match of squash.

I think that about does it for tonight’s stroll. I want to ask you a few things back in the base, too.

If it’s anything I could answer...

After watching the Demon Lord deal with the infamous Animadmiral like a child, even Olgan had lost a bit of her cool. On the other hand, the Demon Lord was smirking at the unexpected turn of events. What could be better for him than gaining information from the enemy, on top of Olgan. He knew very well that relying on one-sided information could become dangerous. Information had to be fathered from both sides and compared and contrasted.

Then let’s go back to the base.

Yes. We’ve come a decent way, but— What are you doing!?

The Demon Lord pulled Olgan to him by her waist, and Quick Traveled.

In an instant, they were standing inside the Secret Lair. Olgan looked around in shock. Coincidentally, her partner Mynk had just experienced the same sensation.

“Wh-What did you do...? Are any of your powers really sealed away!?”

The onslaught of bizarre powers had thoroughly confused Olgan. This question had come out as an astonished outburst, uncharacteristic for her.

“I can jump to anywhere I have been to before. Let’s eat while we talk.”

“The next time you use some insane power... give me a heads-up.”

“I’ll take that into consideration.”

In truth, Olgan really wanted to object to him grabbing her without warning, but she didn’t want to sound like some teenager. With a grumpy expression,

Olgan floated up from the floor and sat on the hammock. She had been curious about this unfamiliar piece of furniture since she first saw it.

“Secret lair, sweet secret lair. It’s just relaxing in here.”

“Sure...” As if by the Demon Lord’s command, Olgan could feel herself unwind.

In reality, she couldn’t fight the overwhelming relaxation she felt within the lair. Even though she knew that they were in the middle of enemy territory, she was confident that they would never be discovered. Even the rocking of the rope-woven bed felt calming.

“Now, let’s taste dish number one, *le mushroom...*”

Hanging his coat and jacket on the wall, the Demon Lord cheerfully produced the mushroom he had harvested before skewering it and placing the skewer by the campfire. Olgan, too, produced an unfamiliar white dough from her bag labeled ‘Mr. Carry-all.’ It reminded the Demon Lord of naan bread, but he couldn’t make out what it was for sure.

“First things first. Tell me about the inhabitants of these parts.”

“The inhabitants...?”

Olgan pondered for a few moments at the curious question. The strange sense she had been feeling about the Demon Lord had culminated in a theory. (Perhaps some of his memories are sealed away, along with his powers...) That theory seemed to explain some things that were stuck in his mind. To the mythological Fallen Angel Lucifer, Animania was practically his back yard. There was no way that he would not know those who inhabited it. (Or is he comparing the current world with how he remembers it...?) This was another natural theory for Olgan to reach. She couldn’t even imagine how many millennia had passed since Lucifer last roamed the continent. The entire landscape of Animania could have changed from his time, let alone its demographics. With that hypothesis, she could make sense of the Demon Lord’s enthusiasm for researching the forest.

With those thoughts in mind, Olgan answered. “I’m not sure what you are looking for, but this is a country ruled by the Dragonborn, supported by eleven

Animadmirals.”

“Animadmirals?”

“Apparently, they are based on the legend of something called a ‘zodiac.’ The one we just encountered was the ape Animadmiral.”

The word ‘zodiac’ reverberated in the Demon Lord’s mind with nostalgia. He couldn’t tell if it was a translation of an unrelated word, or if it was exactly the Chinese zodiac he knew from modern-day Japan.

Tossing the perfectly grilled mushroom into his mouth, the Demon Lord continued. He wanted to know about the average inhabitants, as well as the higher-ups. “Who else lives here other than the Animadmirals?”

Olgan rocked the hammock back and forth. “The best-known species of this land are Dwarves, Elves, and Giants. There are many other species related to beasts, like bull or wolf-hybrids, but humans call them ‘demi-humans’ as a whole.”

“Elves, Dwarves, demi-humans...” The Demon Lord groaned at the list of high-fantasy vocabulary. Of course, he had never interacted with any of them, nor had any knowledge of them. To him, they might as well have been extraterrestrials.

(The Bunnies were apparently demi-humans, too, but they lived their lives among humans...) To their detriment or not, the Bunnies, as far as the Demon Lord knew, lived within the borders of Holylight. He imagined that they were considerably closer to humans than the Elves or Dwarves who seldom showed themselves to humans.

“It sounds like a lot of different species intermingle here. How do they get along?”

The Demon Lord had come to understand that even Holylight was divided into numerous factions fighting for power. And those factions were all composed of humans. He was curious to see how well a melting pot of species coexisted.

“This country borders on Hellion territory. They can’t afford to fight amongst themselves.”

“I see. A common enemy...”

A country often came together when faced with the presence of a clear, external enemy. That much was clear to see from history. At times, rulers even conjured imaginary enemies to achieve this goal.

(But there are twelve members of the Chinese zodiac... They're one short.)

The Demon Lord asked Olgan about that, but she shook her head.

“Sorry. I don't know any reason for that, but...”

“But?”

“Each of the Animadmirals can go head-to-head with a Hellion.”

“Hm...”

Olgan chomped on her naan-like snack, having found a break in the conversation. The Demon Lord found the way she munched on her bread strangely adorable, holding it with both hands and taking small bites from it. “Is that thing seasoned?” he asked. He had expected it to contain some cheese or garlic, but he couldn't smell anything of the sort.

“It's been long since I've tasted anything.”

“...What?”

“It was either the bad food or the poison in it. Who knows how, but I've lost my sense of taste.” Olgan explained matter-of-factly, without any sense of tragedy.

While she seemed to only treat it like a stroke of bad luck, the Demon Lord couldn't get over it.

“Lost your sense of taste... That can't be good.”

“No harm for it. I just need to take in enough nutrients to keep my body going,” Olgan mumbled, still taking bites from her naan.

The Demon Lord couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Not only was she raised with unimaginable torture, but its effects had lingered in the form of her losing her sense of taste.

(She's kind of like Aku and Tron...)

While the Demon Lord made a connection between Olgan and them, Aku and Tron no longer showed the dead expressions they had worn before meeting the Demon Lord. Their encounter with him was, for better or worse, life-changing. Like an overwhelming hurricane that swept everything away.

Watching the Demon Lord lost in thought, Olgan cracked a faint smile. She was now sure that he had lost some of his memory. The mythical Fallen Angel Lucifer, the ruler of the night, did not possess the capability of concerning himself over anyone else.

“Look at your face. You call yourself the Demon Lord, but you have a soft side,” Olgan taunted.

The Demon Lord frowned in defiance. He either took Olgan’s word for it, or decided to strike back as he chomped on one mushroom after the other. “Talk about a soft side... Mm! These mushrooms are delicious!”

Olgan chuckled at the sight of the Demon Lord’s madness. She wished that all of his memories from the past would disappear. She much preferred the man before her now, the one who acted as self-centeredly as the myth, but carried a kindness about him. ...Olgan rushed to shake the thought out of her mind. (No no no... I’m just going to use him for his powers.) They had struck a deal. Business was business. The humanity of her business partner was none of her concern. (Maybe I’m more tired than I thought after today...) Olgan lied down on the hammock. The comfortable rocking brought her close to sleep. Just as her eyes began to close, a piercing scream made her jolt up.

“Reeeeeeeeeeee!”

“Woah!” The Demon Lord shouted. “This mushroom just shrieked!”

One of the mushrooms on the fire had screamed bloody murder, triggering a shout from the Demon Lord. The Shadow Shroom was just as famous for occasionally screaming as it was for being a delicacy.

Seeing the source of the sound, Olgan laid back down. “I forgot to tell you that some of those mushrooms will scream. According to food critics, the screaming ones taste exceptional.”

“Who the hell would want to eat this thing!?”

“Reeeeeeeeeee!”

“Shut up!”

With a stab of the skewer, the mushroom finally fell silent. Olgan nearly let out a chuckle at the ridiculous, yet somehow peaceful, scene. She couldn't remember the last time she had enjoyed such a relaxing evening. (I think I can sleep... well tonight...) Olgan had lived a tough life. Even after escaping Hellion territory, she was often pursued by those trying to bring her back or assassinate her. Having to always be on edge, even during sleep, Olgan had long forgotten what it felt like to have a good night's rest. (But no one will find us... here...) By now, she was completely sure of it. In addition, the man tossing the remaining mushrooms in his mouth with a frown made her feel more secure than the base itself. He was unimaginably powerful, enough to toy with even an Animadmiral. As long as she remained by his side, she was sure that no devil could dent her sense of security. (I feel safe around him... Is this how... a father is supposed to make you feel...?) Watching the flames of the campfire, Olgan relished the joy of letting rest take over without a fight. The hammock rocked ever so slightly to lull her to sleep.

Ironically, the sensation Akira Ono had designed the hammock to give was that of being inside a mother's womb.

A Place to Call Home

——The Royal Quarters, the New Kingdom of Xenobia.

Kongming sighed at the mountain of reports. While her new kingdom was booming with vitality from its rapid expansion, various problems had come up in the process. The villages and towns they had absorbed all had their own unique customs, traditions, cultures, and cuisine. Naturally, the people of those towns abided by different social contracts, too. Kongming was always the one left with micromanaging the relations between the original Xenobians and its newly acquired citizens.

“There's no win-win situation, is there...?” There were all sorts of problems, such as royal drama, pleas for support from the countryside, military power struggles, and court battles over land and rights; all of these were brought to

Kongming's attention every day. At the root of them all was pushback against being conquered and occupied. No matter how many righteous excuses they laid out, people who were made to serve by force would never forget and forgive. The occupied people sabotaged the delivery of goods to the frontlines, discriminated against people based on their region of birth, and so much more.

"You're a devil wearing human skin, Senpai. You just can't empathize with people," Beatrice said, munching on a cookie.

She was lying in her extravagant bed with only her head poking out of the covers, as always. On the surface, she had a snail-like charm to her.

"Only the strongest survive in this world. The weak will never be more than prey."

"But you prey on the strong, too, Senpai. You bluegill," Beatrice laughed.

Bluegills, on top of eating anything they could get their mouths on, were revolting to human taste buds. Beatrice was insinuating that no one would touch Kongming with a ten-foot pole.

"Eat everything in its path..."

"Senpai?"

"Beatrice, do you know why we've expanded our land this much?"

"We? I had no part in this. This is all your doing, Bluegill Senpai."

"Stop calling me a bluegill!"

"Nrah! Violence never solved anything!"

Seeing Beatrice shrink under her covers, Kongming drooped her shoulders in exhaustion. It wasn't like Kongming had any personal grudges against the neighboring nations, it all began when the incompetent king before her was exiled. After this pseudo-coup, Kongming had created a clear, external enemy. She had counted on pleasing the people by expanding their nation's land and making the citizens wealthier... and Kongming was right. Xenobia had grown by absorbing the surrounding villages and towns, sometimes by force, in a period of rapid expansion. Each time some problems arose from the absorption or conquering, Kongming had deflected the people's rage to an outside source.

Xenobia rapidly bloated up like it was reenacting *Supersize Me*, for those who remember.

Before she knew it, Beatrice was dubbed the ‘Little Conqueror of the North,’ and Kongming the ‘Minister of Ice.’

(A rolling stone won’t come to a stop so easily...) This thought crossed Kongming’s mind. Xenobia appeared to be a wealthy and powerful nation from the exterior, but always carried the risk of its makeshift structures crumbling from the inside out. Behind its intimidating façade, Xenobia was hollow. They couldn’t expect lasting loyalty from the people and military their nation had absorbed. The people’s hearts were hanging on by a thread, suspended by the illusory charisma of their ‘conqueror’ Beatrice.

(It was salvageable when we had enemies on the outside...)

While war came at great cost, it stimulated various industries and the economy as a whole. More than anything, it swept away all internal issues of the country. When it was life or death, no country could afford to fight amongst themselves. There were countless nations that acted like Xenobia throughout history. Most of them had gradually crumbled from internal corruption, or lost it all to one catastrophic defeat in battle.

“But you’re being super chill lately, Senpai. Finally bored of killing?”

“Not enough to kill you right now.”

“Nrah! Murder never solved anything!”

After shutting down Beatrice’s snarky comment, Kongming delved further into thought. Until this point, all Xenobia had to do was wander through the north like a hungry piranha, looking for its next chunk of meat. However, they couldn’t keep fighting forever. After invading the Principality of Marmook — with which they had been waging war since the rule of Xenobia’s previous king — and absorbing the infamously militaristic Kingdom of Palma, Xenobia was completely worn out.

“If he wasn’t around... we could have...”

Kongming thought of a particular man. A hero who single-handedly grew Palma into the military nation it came to be, as well as standing his ground one

uphill battle after another.

“Talking about General Leon?”

“Don’t say that name around me. It ticks me off just hearing it...” Kongming’s already slanting eyes sharpened further.

Each time Leon appeared on the battlefield, Xenobia had suffered a loss. At times, their entire strategies were completely thwarted by him. Kongming still heard that name in her nightmares.

“He’s one of us now, Senpai, thanks to your scheme. Unlike a *certain someone*, General Leon is honorable and kind... I respect him, really. General Leon. He’s a man I can really...”

““Oh, Leon! Leon! Leon!’ Shut up, already!”

“...Le-on.”

“No puns about him, either!”

“What do you have against puns, Senpai!? Stop being such a jer— *eeek!*”

Having thrown a stack of paper into Beatrice’s face, Kongming contemplated the man who still haunted her dreams. In order to get him off of the battlefield, Kongming had spread all sorts of vile rumors until the king of Palma grew suspicious enough to withdraw the general. It’s worth noting that Kongming had used the same tactic in the past to get Weeb the Paladin away from the battlefield, too. In his case, she only spread word of the truth, though.

“You kidnapped their princess and had her locked up, didn’t you, Senpai? Poor General Leon, for real. Forcing him to swear his loyalty by taking his princess hostage? You should feel ashamed to be alive. Come to think of it, you’re the epitome of humanity’s sins. Seriously, how do you live with yourself?”

Kongming nearly strangled Beatrice, but managed to control herself. Kill this bad-mouthing brat, A.K.A. the ruler of her country, and she would go down with her. “Beatrice. I remember explaining to you that that story was just a tactic to control Leon, and not the truth.”

“I forgot.”

“What are you, a goldfish!? The only thing you seem to grow are those tits!”

“I’m growing taller, too! *Hrapeh!*”

Kongming threw pile after pile of paperwork, smacking Beatrice square in the face each time. Beatrice wasn’t entirely wrong, since that rumor had been widely spread and accepted as truth. Most people now believed that the Minister of Ice had ordered the kidnapping of said princess and locked her up in some isolated prison.

“I’ve done no such thing... It must have been the devil’s doing.”

“But you’re the devil, Senpai. You *do* admit it. One execution, coming right up.”

“I’ll execute you!”

Having reached her limit, Kongming flung the comforter away and jumped onto Beatrice, who could barely fight her off before being pinned onto her bed.



“Ahhhh! I’m being kidnapped by the devil!”

“I’ll fill that filthy mouth of yours with ice... I wonder how much you can take.”

“N-No... It’s too big, it won’t fit!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll stuff it in there nice and easy...”

“Senpai!? You’re scaring me!”

The pair rolled around on the bed, saying things to each other that could easily be misconstrued in certain ways. Just as her moniker suggested, by the way, Kongming specialized in Ice magic, an elevation of Water, with excellent proficiency.

“I’ll have you know that I really wasn’t behind it. I’m innocent.”

“You’re lying! I know it! With your motto of ‘eat, sleep, murder,’ you’d kidnap a princess in *your* sleep... *Hrmgah!*”

“Let’s fit another one in there...”

“Y-You pervert! You get off on ice, Senpai!”

Truth be told, Kongming really was innocent when it came to this incident. However, it was telling of her power that the rest of the world easily believed that she could do it. Using that misunderstanding to her advantage, she had insinuated that the princess would be freed if Leon served Xenobia well, and thus the ever-loyal general was turned.

“My bet is she was killed or burned when we took their castle. Or she killed herself.”

When a castle or a fortress fell, unimaginable brutality took place. An onslaught of pillaging, raping, and murdering. Palma was no exception. When their castle fell, the raging fire spread to the castle town, burning the entire city to ashes. It wasn’t too hard to imagine the princess among the countless citizens who were burned to death.

“You might as well have killed her, Senpai. It’s not too late. You have to turn yourself in. I’ll sentence you to death, don’t worry. Death to all perverts!”

“I see. You want me to chill some of your other orifices, too...?”

“Nooooo!”

——Elsewhere, as the pair continued to tussle...

The famed hero was standing on a battlefield on the border of Xenobia, distant from the royal palace. The western front of the nation faced numerous foreign forces, and was always caught up in warfare. The other nations formed and broke alliances constantly, and with all sorts of mercenaries in the mix, this area was a pit of chaos. Even though Kongming didn't fully trust said hero, she was forced to use him in battle in order to protect their frontline.

“That village is too close to where we anticipate the next battle... Tell them to evacuate.”

Leon gave this order, observing the surroundings from a hill. He was a tall and well-built man, adorned with a weapon and armor becoming of a war hero. Lending in no small part to his intimidating stature was the lance he held in his hand: Gladeus the Heaven Piercer. The sight of Leon glaring down at their next battlefield electrified his men with unending courage. Just by simply standing there, Leon completely changed the air of the frontlines. His silver hair, that may have lost its hue due to his past tribulations, gave an almost mystical shimmer to the general's appearance.

Still, there was a man that looked at Leon with dissatisfaction. “That little village, General Leon? We should burn it or take it over.”

“This is our war. We mustn't drag innocent folks into it.”

“Yes, sir... I won't argue with orders,” Zorm, his first-in-command, spat out.

Leon couldn't help but internally groan. This first-in-command that had been thrust upon him was extremely vile and uncooperative. He defied orders with nonchalance, and would feel no remorse in burning down an innocent village without anyone's permission. Leon had to keep Zorm under constant watch to prevent him from performing some sort of atrocity. As a result, Leon found himself unable to mobilize at times. Of course, Kongming was the one who had shackled Leon with him.

(‘Defend the border, but on *our* terms’ is the gist of this message...) Leon had picked up on Kongming’s intentions, but had no way of defying them. After he was distanced from the king he swore his loyalty to, his nation collapsed. Leon’s only ray of hope was the little girl, now a princess to a nonexistent nation. As far as Leon knew, even she had been locked up in a secret location by the Minister of Ice.

(I must find out where she is...) Recalling the princess, who was as precious as a flower, Leon tightened his grip on Heaven Piercer. He was determined to save the angelic princess whom everyone adored. Now that his country had fallen, Leon was the only one left to save her. (Just you watch, Xenobia... I’ll save the princess and bring your heinous crimes to justice, no matter what it takes...!) The memories of his missing princess stoked the black flames within this hero’s heart.

Zorm seemed to have sensed something smoldering in Leon, and snidely remarked, “General, I think it would be in your best interest not to let your mind wander.”

“Wander where?”

“Funny thing for me to say, but do you know the trick to surviving war, General?”

“...Let’s hear it.”

“Gah ha! You gotta watch your back more than your front!”

The hero’s brows slightly twisted. Zorm had uncharacteristically made an accurate assessment, in the sense that participants of war should pay more care to the powerful people who pulled their strings, even more than to the enemies they fought. Throughout history, many successful war heroes had been demonized for the threat they posed to the ruling powers, and ended their lives in captivity or tragic death, often after unfounded rumors sullied their reputation and public support.

“You should have already learned that lesson the hard way, General. We’re just gonna keep eyes on our backs and reap the perks of war! It’s a buffet of killing, robbing, and screwing! The battlefield’s a paradise, ain’t it!?” Zorm cackled and walked away.

Left alone, the hero gazed up at the cloudy sky with a bitter expression. No rays of light shone through the clouds, as if the heavens were reflecting Leon's state of mind.

—The Slave Market, Hellion Territory.

Like Leon, here was a man who had lost his home. This man was Hummer, who had climbed aboard a particular ship without knowing what the vessel was carrying. Now, he found himself in a cage. Like Hummer, most of his fellow crewmates were each imprisoned in a cage, tied to the famous slave marketplace in Hellion territory.

(How did I end up here...?)

Hummer tossed and turned in a rag-like blanket in an attempt to distract himself from hunger. Ever since being trapped in the cage, he was given food and water only once every few days. Each 'meal,' if one could call them that, appeared to be the scraps of whatever Hellions fed to pigs. Despite the freezing cold nights, he was given no more than the thin blanket. The crew of the ship, who were all yelling and clamoring at first, had become much quieter. Whenever Hummer realized that some of them had suddenly fallen silent in the middle of the night, he found them dead when morning came.

(What a useless waste of a life...)

No matter what job he took, Hummer had been branded slow and useless. Even his once-in-a-lifetime decision to become an adventurer had resulted in him suffering a severe injury and retiring from the trade altogether. After being called a useless porter, he ended up as crew-for-hire and was now a slave on the market. Hummer was utterly and ruthlessly hopeless. If any god did exist in this world, they never gave Hummer a second look.

"Grek! Lots of goods this time around."

"L-L-Look at all that meat... I-I'm gonna start with the toesies!"

Hellions of various species, all of which were completely alien to Hummer, wandered around the slave cages. Hummer felt his life being whittled away just from being conscious in this environment. At this point, death would have been

a welcome escape.

(I can't feel my fingers anymore...) As his vision blurred from hypothermia, Hummer was reminded of how he ended up here. He couldn't tell if he was escaping into his memories or if his life was flashing before him. (The sea was a lot of fun. That vast, shimmering sea...) Hummer had suffered through some hardships while seafaring, like pirate attacks, rainstorms, and the countless slips and falls on the deck, but that journey was the most exciting and fulfilling time Hummer had spent in his life. Even the ship's first mate, Marlin, who kept his distance at first, gradually accepted Hummer and his hard work. Near the end of their voyage, Marlin had even taught him how to fish. (Marlin... Captain...) Recalling the two of them, Hummer felt tears streak down his cheeks. Neither of them were with him anymore. (I was so happy when we docked...) Hummer had only discovered that he was in Hellion territory after they started unloading the ship. Those among the crew who were unaware of their destination were shaken with fear, while the experienced crew shouted back and forth, trying to sail away as quickly as possible. Hummer moved his portly body as fast as he could as he carried one box after another onto shore. That's when he realized that their cargo included humans.

"What...?" He stared in disbelief at the horde of people being herded down the ramp from the ship. Each of them had a hole in each hand, allowing one long rope to keep them tethered together like a rosary. At first glance, they seemed more like a herd of cattle than people. "What are they...?" Hummer mumbled to himself.

"Keep moving, Old Man."

"B-But, Marlin..."

Marlin only answered with a glare. *You know where you are*, his eyes seemed to say. On the ship, it wasn't uncommon for the rain to drown out any amount of shouting. As a result, the crew had often communicated via gestures and facial expressions. In this case, Marlin's eyes made his point much more clearly than he could have with words.

"Ay-Aye..."

Despite his dread and hesitation, Hummer continued unloading the heavy

boxes from the ships. He could see that the other crew members, perhaps in their best attempts to deny the reality of the situation, averted their eyes from the chain of people as they carried various cargo onto shore. As Hummer concentrated on the physical task at hand, it almost felt like they weren't in Hellion territory.

(Are we really...?)

The sky was clear and blue above, and the port they had docked in was well-built, housing numerous warehouses. Even the architecture of the town in the distance seemed similar to that of a human settlement. Most people of this continent imagined Hellion territory to be shrouded in dark clouds, with magma spewing out of cracks in the ground. In truth, that image was only instilled to the public by years of clerics' sermons, a sort of brainwashing. Not that there weren't a few hell-like places within Hellion territory, but the vast majority of the land was similar to human territory. Lands ruled by competent grand devils were as prosperous as any human city. Most of their roads were even paved.

"Not what you expected, right?" Marlin commented, as if he had read Hummer's mind. He must have felt the same way on his first encounter with this place.

"...N-No."

"If no one told you, you might mistake it for another human country... Look on the roof of that warehouse, though."

Hummer turned to find some monster looking down at them from atop the roof with its singular eyeball too large for its tiny purple body. The monster was called a Watchful Eye, loathed by adventurers because it observes its targets to learn their equipment, strengths, and weaknesses. When the monster grows, it mutates into an Overseer. An Overseer is a species that pulls the trigger on a monster invasion. Anyone who spots a Watchful Eye is obligated to report it to the guild.

"M-Marlin, that's..."

"That's above your paygrade, Old Man. Folks on shore gotta deal with that."

"S-Still..."

“We belong to the sea. We can’t afford to deal with things on land... Not now,” Marlin concluded.

Even so, Hummer trembled at the eerie monster eye watching his every move. He had just lived through an invasion back in Rookie, after all.

(Th-That thing will cause an invasion too one day...)

Imagining the scenario, Hummer couldn’t stop trembling. In fact, he wasn’t even sure if he would make it out of this port alive.

By the time they had finished unloading the ship, some low-rank devils had appeared on the docks, here and there. Their incessant glaring slowed Hummer even more.

“Keep your head down, Old Man. Don’t provoke them.”

“Ay-Aye...” Hummer faintly responded.

Of course, the color had drained from Marlin’s face, too. “It’s just business. It’s business...” he kept mumbling, as if to convince himself.

(There are some people over there...)

Spotting some humans among the Hellhounds and Skeleton Warriors astounded Hummer all over again. Their necks were shackled with collars, illuminated with sinister markings. Even Hummer, who had no knowledge of magic, could sense that the markings were indications of their servitude.

“They’ve been fighting each other for a long time around here. The number of humans they have is just another display of power,” Marlin explained, matter-of-factly. Hummer shuddered to realize that Marlin’s kindness, which usually peeked through his stoic demeanor, was nowhere to be found. “Old Man, we carry any kind of cargo for money. Food, booze, dangerous drugs, and even people. That’s the only way you’ll survive at sea.”

“B-But...”

“It’s the only way you’ll survive anywhere in this rotten world.”

With that, Marlin hoisted a box onto his shoulder and started walking. After a few trips of stacking cargo in the designated warehouse, some humans were the only merchandise left on the ship.

“Gather up, everyone.” The captain called his crew without giving them a chance to rest. The men grouped up around him, every one of them stiff with fear. “Good job. Now, we will go greet the king of this land in order to deliver our final cargo. It goes without saying, but make sure you don’t insult him. You mustn’t speak a word.”

As the crew stiffly nodded in acknowledgment, the bishop was in conversation with an Ominous Mage, who appeared to be a human clad in a large, tattered robe from head to toe, leaning on a long staff. No one could even tell if the figure was a young man or an old woman. While their silhouette was human-like, an Ominous Mage was considered a monster, a spellcaster who had lost themselves to sinister arts. The bishop had some guts for merely standing face-to-face with such a being without showing a sign of terror. While some of the crew found the bishop’s attitude reassuring, Hummer couldn’t shake a bad feeling about them. What would a Light-worshiping cleric and a fallen mage have to talk about?

“...It’s time.” The Ominous Mage produced a large mirror.

“Hm. Indeed.” The Bishop stepped through the mirror without hesitation, and disappeared.

“M-Marlin—”

“Not a word, Old Man. You want your tongue yanked out?”

The captain followed the bishop through the mirror. Seeing that, the rest of the crew followed suit, one by one, trembling all the way. Hummer stood before the mirror, praying to the Great Light and the Angel.

(Our Great Light, Dear Angel... P-Please help us...!)

“Now, human...”

“Ah!” Just as he heard a voice urge him, Hummer reflexively jumped into the mirror.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself in a solemn room.

(Where... Am I...?)

It was a throne room filled with crimson and gold décor. The room was not

only extravagant, but oppressive. The entire crew was astounded by the glitzy and bloody colors of the walls and ceiling. On the throne stood a grand devil, pitch-black wings spreading behind his full, golden armor: Belphegor. The eyes of his helmet looked like a roughly sewn stitch. Just the sight of him made Hummer feel anguish in his soul. Seeing the bishop perform a deep bow, all the humans in the room fell on all fours, rubbing their foreheads on the floor. This was in order to avert their eyes as much as possible, more so than their fear for the devil.

“O king, the Ruler of the Seven... We come before you in accordance with our contract.”

The only thing Hummer understood from the bishop’s greeting was that the Tzardom of Light had struck some sort of deal with the king of this land.

“A ripe set of cargo, indeed. Their condition, however...” A cold voice boomed from within the suit of armor.

His voice alone froze the core of every human there. The clattering of teeth echoed in the throne room.

“Forgive me. Our humble nation had to display our authority to our foolish neighbors...”

The grand devil seemed to have noticed that the slaves had been whipped and damaged more than expected. He pointed this out like he was criticizing some vegetable in the produce aisle. After a few moments of eerie silence, Belphegor snapped his fingers. The door opened, and a horde of low-rank devils — the Hunietraps — carried in various items, such as rare metals and monster parts that were only available in Hellion territory, in addition to three treasure chests. The bishop inspected each piece before finally opening the three large treasure chests. Upon seeing that they were all stuffed with leather bags, his nose-breathing became audible. The hardcore drug of choice on this continent was ‘trance,’ an expensive but relatively available substance. It had a considerable presence in the underground market as a painkiller. Mercenaries used them too, in order to mitigate the fears or pains that came with battle, as well as for simple pleasure, but the drug that Belphegor had presented the bishop with was of a different nature. This was krack, an extremely potent and

addictive drug that could easily rot one's mind.

"May I...?"

Belphegor simply nodded at the bishop's request.

The bishop snorted a small amount of powder. In an instant, his expression changed, making him appear like he was drowning in bliss.

"Th-This is some high-quality krack... Incredible. I shall climb the ranks of my country even higher..."

The bishop let slip that he intended to pocket some of the merchandise. He could sell it off, turn higher-ups into addicts, or do any of numerous different things someone like him was capable of.

"King of the Seven, let us fulfill our contract—"

"What of the hawk?" Belphegor interrupted the bishop, an ominous glare peering through the rough stitch.

"King. I believe we are each a little light on our cargo." The bishop stood, meeting Belphegor's eyes with his. He had expected ten chests, not three like what was before him. "I've learned a few tricks since our last transaction... Deals must be executed with utmost caution."

The horde of Hunietrap jumped up at the bishop's comment, but were immediately silenced by Belphegor raising his hand.

"Pulling tricks, human? You presume that we are equal?"

"Make a deal with a devil, expect to bite some poison. I've learned that from you, My Lord."

Belphegor's helmet moved up and down, as if he was laughing.

"When a human falls... it can be quite amusing."

Belphegor snapped his fingers and a horde of Gargoyles and Rock Golems swarmed the throne room, shoving the slaves into another large mirror. Then they reached for the ship's crew.

"K-King, what are you...?"

"I'll excuse the lack of etiquette this time. Leave *those* as a token of your

loyalty.”

The bishop quickly calculated the damage, and decided that the loss of this crew would be well worth the remaining krack.

“No need to concern yourself with your return journey,” Belphegor added. “I’ll have a Kraken carry your ship close enough to the country.”

“What an incredible honor.”

It was thoroughly ironic that the Tzardom’s ship was to be carried by the sea monster their religion loathed.

The captain was the one that spoke up. “This wasn’t the deal, bishop! You guaranteed our safety!”

“I don’t recall such a guarantee. You’ve tasted more than your fair share of nectar along the way... It’s simply your time.”

“Y-You call yourself a servant of the Great Light!?”

“Ha ha ha! The Great Light? My faith in such a thing has long run dry.”

Belphegor was laughing with contentment, as if he was amused by the quarrel of these humans. Then, he extended a single finger. Instantly, the captain blew into pieces. Someone’s voice might have echoed through the throne room. Blood and bits of flesh that used to be the captain scattered all over the floor. The monsters continued to drag away the crew with ease, as if to mock the humans in shock.

“Noooo!”

“H-Help me! Please!”

“I have— I have a child back home... No, please... I don’t want to die!”

Even as the throne room descended to madness, the sacrificial lambs were dragged away. Marlin, whose eyes were bloodshot with rage and horror, drew a knife from his belt and leapt at the bishop.

“You bastard!”

“Ha! What is this, lowly scum...? **Blade of Light.**”

With a wave of the bishop’s staff, he sliced through Marlin’s hand and thigh.

Even Marlin, who kept all the hooligans in check on the ship, was rendered powerless before the bishop.

“M-Marlin!” Hummer ran to him.

“Damn, I screwed up... Run, Old Man...”

Two Rock Golems grabbed both Hummer and Marlin and began to carry them away. As screams echoed in the room, the king on the throne thinned his eyes in satisfaction.

“The screams of humans... Ever so pleasing. There’s much more room for research...”

Belphegor turned to the bishop, as if expecting him to agree. The bishop’s brows twisted. Everything was fine as long as the demon’s ruthless violence was directed away from him, but if it were ever directed his way...

“I can only hope that said research is only performed on the heretics...” the bishop answered, and immediately realized how ridiculous that was. He assumed that the Tzardom of Light, which worshiped the Great Light, must seem more heretical than any other human civilization.

However, Belphegor’s attention seemed to have already shifted away. “Bring me the hawk... That one is a species lost to this world. I must keep it close, under my care.”

Magic erupted from Belphegor like a gust of wind, intimidating the bishop. He nodded, knowing that he wouldn’t be so lucky as to get away with actually pulling a trick next time.

“My King. I hope our next deal may be beneficial for us both.”

“As do I.”

With that empty exchange, they concluded their first transaction. Their next transaction would be the main course.

(Damn demons... I’ll exterminate you all one day...!)

And so, the bishop was placed aboard the ship loaded with cargo and sent back to Suneo. The remaining crew were thrown into cages, and carried off to the slave market via another mirror.

As the melodic screams of humans faded from the throne room, silence boomed. Belphegor contemplated for some time with a hand on his chin, before uttering a sinister comment. “Not enough...”

As if to answer his utterance, a skeleton sitting by the window began clamoring. This was the infamous devil in charge of the slave market.

“Even with the considerable amount of sacrificial offerings, My King seems unsatisfied...”

A black aura whirled around the skeleton, forming a silhouette. An ordinary Skeleton Warrior had evolved over myriad ages to become Count Impaler, an extremely vile high-ranking devil. He wore black from head to toe, with a dress shirt, jacket, and leather pants. The Count even wore a top hat, accented with peculiar silver details. He dressed like a noble, but his face was literal skin and bones, without even lips to cover his teeth.

“Only that my dear daughter is not with me.”

“The mademoiselle is as free-spirited as you, My King. She still has the potential of maturing like a fine wine after a long journey...”

“Or lose her taste from exposure to bad air.”

“I doubt that you say so in earnest, My King, but if you are... I shall take on the task myself.” Count Impaler grinned.

Belphegor only scoffed, unamused. He had been sending small-scale assault teams at random times, finding amusement in slowly putting his daughter through mental torture.

“Humans often send their offspring off on a journey, don’t they...?”

Count Impaler laughed, clattering his teeth at the king’s remark. Belphegor was the one who paved his daughter’s path with fear and anguish, after all.

“I eagerly await her return.”

Belphegor concurred, then laughed from within his helmet, wondering if there was anything in this world as sweet as a reunion with his beloved daughter, who was sure to have grown stronger in anger and hopelessness.

Meanwhile, Hummer was desperately trying to save Marlin after being

thrown in the same cage. However, he had no medicine, or even a piece of fabric to tie the wounds. He couldn't stop the bleeding as the color continued to drain from Marlin's face.

"H-Hang in there...!" Hummer cried.

"One day..." Marlin squeezed out through his panting. Since the Rock Golem was carrying the cage without much care, they were being rattled left and right and up and down, making it difficult for Hummer to hear Marlin at all. "I knew something like... this would happen... one day..."

"Marlin...?"

"Guess it's my punishment... for the captain, too. We've done plenty of awful things."

The sky above them was tainted dark-red, and their surroundings had shifted to a desolate land of bare rock. To Hummer, it seemed like they were literally on the road to hell.

"And now it's my turn to face the music..." Marlin continued. "I ran away from solid ground, and look where I ended up."

"H-Hang in there, I've gotta stop the blood..." Hummer stripped off his jacket and pressed it into Marlin's thigh. His cheap jacket became red before his eyes, as if the fabric was soaking up Marlin's life itself.

Marlin, having realized something, produced a book from his pocket. "You live an honest life, Old Man." Hummer couldn't respond to that. An honest life? He couldn't even see the next sunrise ahead of him, let alone any future. "You got what it takes to live out on the sea... Don't get stuck on the boring land, all right...? Go out... on the sea..."

"Marlin...?"

Marlin handed Hummer the book, his hand shaking uncontrollably. Then, he fell silent. His eyes were widened, as if he were glaring up at the sky above. Despite Hummer's persistent calls, Marlin never spoke again.

Amidst the sobbing and groaning, the crew was finally brought to what they assumed to be the slave market. If there was a hell in this world, this was it.

There were numerous people chained up and crammed into cages. All of them already on display at the market seemed to have lost any will to scream or protest. All of their expressions were ghostly. A horrible stench, of blood in particular, assaulted the noses of the crew. The Rock Golem lowered Hummer's cage and yanked Marlin out of it, tossing his body into a large pond nearby like a piece of garbage.

(N-No...)

Hummer realized that it was not a pond of water, but blood. Upon closer inspection, countless bodies floated on its surface. He even spotted a devil soaking in the pond with an elated expression. Beside it was a woman, perhaps the subject of some 'experiment,' whose arms were being broken by clubs and the rest of her body was stabbed with needles. Hummer released a beast-like groan in shock.

In the center of the marketplace, there were dozens of people being hung by rope, tortured to the Hellions' content. Some were stabbed with blades, some with spears. Hummer couldn't tell if any of them were still alive.

The worst sight yet was the large coffin standing on its end. The interior of the coffin was lined with countless spikes, into which the Hellions tossed one emaciated person at a time, letting their agonized screams ring through the market. The coffin itself seemed to be a devil, as it spewed blood from a mouth-like orifice on its head, which served as a bright red shower for the devils bathing in the pond. The crew let out a collective scream, when a bemused voice could be heard from a cage neighboring Hummer's.

"This is divine judgment... Divine judgment for you all... For selling your fellow men..." The voice that came from under a tattered piece of fabric sounded elderly. The cloth moved up and down as the elder laughed. "The Angel is always watching... Judgment has come for you soulless bastards." Beastly eyes peered through the rag and pierced Hummer's conscience.

Hummer violently shook his head. "Th-That's not why I joined the ship—"

"Rot in hell, slave traders. You'll be next on the—" The old man's cage flung open and two goblins stuck their nose in, sniffing it all over. "S-Stop...!"

"This, no good," one of the goblins said.

“No use. We take,” said the other.

“I-I’m alive! Take someone else! I’ve endured this place for years...” The old man shouted, having somehow reserved the strength.

The goblins raised their clubs and struck the old man’s head without mercy. He let out one last squeal.

“Quiet now.” The goblins dragged the man out by the rag and took him away.

The whole interaction seemed systematic, as if they were sniffing out the scent of impending death.

(It’s over... It’s all over...) Indescribable hopelessness filled Hummer’s heart. He couldn’t see how he could possibly escape from such a place. (Heh... Until the bitter end, I’m such a... pathetic...) With no shame or pride left, Hummer buried his face in his blood-soaked jacket and cried his eyes out. Was this how his life, filled with Hummer desperately trying to find one livelihood he could pursue without being called useless, would come to an end...? (Miss Michi... I don’t think I’ll ever make it back...) His biggest regret was about the woman who had taken care of him in Rookie. If she hadn’t given him leftovers, Hummer would have starved to death a long time ago. (I wish I could have repaid her for her kindness, just once...) Hummer had lived decades with the feeble dream of returning home with his coin purse full of silver, but it seemed like that wasn’t going to come true after all. (At least, at the very end... I’ll keep my chin... up...)

Some time passed. When Hummer looked up, he found a girl standing outside of his cage.

“H-Here you go... Mister.”

“What?”

The girl had presented him with a piece of stale bread and some water. Hummer timidly took them, but he couldn’t bring himself to eat or drink at the moment.

“P-Please eat... Even a little bit...”

“In this place...? I can’t really...” Hummer was now sure that surviving longer in this place would only compound his suffering. He might have had a sliver of a

chance against a single goblin, but he couldn't very well fight or escape the crowd of devils around the market. "Don't bother with me... You should eat this, Miss..."

"Um... I understand how you feel... But you have to... eat..." The girl, whose shoulders had been quivering, finally looked up. Tears were forming in her eyes. "P-Please, don't give up... I will... try my best, too..."

"I-I..."

"Ahh! I-I'm sorry! I shouldn't have been so pushy..."

"N-No, it's not that..."

The girl and Hummer both apologized to each other. Once they realized that they were both apologizing, they shared an awkward chuckle.

"M-My name is Cake. May I ask what your name is?"

"I-I'm Hummer."

She repeated the name a few times, placing her hands on her chest. Every gesture she made was so sweet that Hummer felt like he couldn't look at her. His dirtied appearance and the fact that he was locked in a cage further accentuated the contrast between them.

"It's very nice to meet you, Mister Hummer."

"Y-Yes..."

With a bow from Hummer, the girl smiled, and moved on to the next cage. She appeared to be delivering bread and water to the other cages, too. At each cage, the girl spoke to the person within to lift their spirits.

(Even that little girl is living strong...)

While Hummer felt ashamed for his own fatalistic attitude, he couldn't shake the sensation that the girl was out of place. Her spotless body was covered by a misplaced dress, extravagant enough to be worn at a royal ball. In fact, a pair of goblins walked by Hummer's cage, glaring at the girl.

"That kid. No like. I want her arm. To eat. Soft arms."

"No. That Master Kale's favorite."

“Hmph. Master Kale no come back. He bored.”

“She some princess. Count want to kill her soon...”

Hummer had curled himself up against the corner of his cage to avoid the goblins’ gaze as much as possible. Their last comment shocked him.

(P-Princess...!?) It was inconceivable to find a princess in Hellion territory, and in a slave market, no less... Under ordinary circumstances, at least. In the war-torn north, however, dynasties rose and fell by the day, and royalty of fallen nations often suffered horrific ends. (Maybe she was sold off... For revenge?) Hummer felt sorry for the girl, but there was nothing he could do. He was facing the more dire question of whether or not he would live to see another day.

(O Great Light, Angel, Goddess of Destiny... Please, have mercy on that girl, if no one else...) Hummer prayed to any divine deity he could think of. If someone were to hear his prayer, they wouldn’t have much time to answer it.

When the sky began to darken, the girl returned to the worn-out tent provided to her. While many humans still writhed in the slave market, their number was shrinking. The girl wore a woeful expression, and appeared to be heartbroken by the lives lost here. She scribbled a few marks on the piece of paper on her table and cracked her neck, exhausted.

“Shit,” the girl suddenly muttered to herself. “There’s not enough replacements... Those fuckers drop like flies.” Her contorted frown utterly betrayed the delicate façade she had been putting up. The paper on the table was filled to the margins with names, each of them marked with various symbols from circles, triangles, to Xs. The Xed out names seemed to indicate the deceased. “Bunch of skinny-ass bitches... At this rate, my turn’s gonna... Ugh, that fucking devil...” She worked her way through the list with an ink brush, and paused when she came to a particular name: ‘Hummer.’ “That one was fat, at least. Maybe he’ll last a little longer. As long as I show some tears here and there...”

“Whasaaap!? Look at you, my little actress, you!”

“Ah!”

A large pumpkin materialized in the tent, from which Kale, the high-ranking devil, peeked his head out. He had a brimming smile on, as if he was coming to play at a friend's house.

"What a display of humility out there! You just love yourself so much, don't you? Ahahahahahaha!" Hearing the devil laughing his head off, the little girl only kept her eyes down. She knew fully well that responding in any way would only worsen her situation. "How many more to go? It's your turn on the torture block once that number of people die, so you better help them with all you got. You've gotta give them courage and spirit... You've gotta be their shining ray of hope!" While the girl remained silent, her body began quivering, true to her emotions. She knew too intimately what this exceptionally vile devil was capable of.

"Ahaha! Look at your face! But c'mon, Princess. Where's that royal smile? The people would be disappointed if their princess looked like that! Oh, right, you don't *got* any people anymore!" Kale tossed her a pair of goblin heads, blood still dripping, although they were bizarrely lacking in eyes, nose, ears, lips, and teeth. "These guys were saying some mean things about me. Isn't that terrible? I held back my tears and taught them an important lesson... That they're a couple of rotten oranges! Haha!"

The one-sided conversation drew tears from the girl's eyes, and genuine tears this time. "The harder you work, the more those people will try to live! Then they'll lose that hope with time, until they find it again and lose it again! Isn't that just the funniest cycle in the world!? Right!? Ahahahahahaha!" Kale's cackle echoed in the tent, and a knife struck the girl's hand resting on the table. Blood soaked the paper below, dying the names on the page red as if to foreshadow their destinies. "Ya gotta work a lot harder, y'know. Remember, I'm your biggest fan! Remember!" Kale stabbed the girl's hand again and again. Some unintelligible cries escaped her mouth, which only served as a pleasant tone in Kale's ears. "Okay. I'm going to go break in through the front door. Don't go anywhere! Oh, and here's some medicine," Kale added as he tossed a shell into the room. "If there's any left over, you can use it on those catt—Oh, I mean *people* out there!"

With that, Kale floated away. The only thing that remained with the girl was

her blood-soaked paper and the shell of medicine on the ground. She picked up the shell with a quivering hand and rubbed the green cream within it onto her wounds. She cried in agony — while the medicine was effective, it came with searing pain. Even a hardened knight would have writhed in anguish.

“Help... me... Please...” The girl feebly muttered.

Alas, there was no one else in her tent, and only the horde of caged sacrificial lambs outside.

Who are You Talking About?

——The Secret Lair, Northern Animania.

Despite the violent atmosphere outside, the Demon Lord and Olgan were having quite the relaxing time. They had been researching the forest for a while without any major incidents, leaving them perfectly complacent. They were in the attic of the Secret Lair again, peeking into the telescope.

“Does this magic item help you scout over a distance?”

“It’s a telescope. Mm... It’s a tool used to look at the night sky.”

“The night sky...” Olgan didn’t understand why anyone would make such a thing. What was the point of seeing the stars a little bigger? “Right. You were once called the Ruler of the Night. You’ve made this item to rule those stars in the sky, too?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. This is mere observational equipment. Look at those stars, for example. Deneb, Altair, and Vega. The Summer Triangle.”

“Hm. They do form a triangle if you connect them... I think?”

“There’s another one called the Big Dipper. Now, where was it...?” Peering into the telescope, the Demon Lord couldn’t help but wonder how even stars in the sky of this world were identical to those observed from Earth. (Who made this world, anyway...? That Great Light they always talk about?) The question that had been burning him for ages came to the forefront of his mind again. No matter how long he contemplated, the Demon Lord had not been able to reach a solid conclusion.

Olgan paid no mind to the Demon Lord's conundrum, and continued to watch the stars through the telescope. Uninterested at first, she slowly leaned into the telescope as she became captivated by the shimmering lights.

"Do the stars make any other shapes?" she asked. "What's that one? The red one."

"That's Antares, I believe. It's part of Scorpio..."

The Demon Lord demonstrated his half-baked knowledge of the constellations, peeking into the telescope from over Olgan's shoulder. From afar, the pair might have appeared as a father and daughter on a camping trip. Perhaps Olgan thought of something similar to that. While her expression never changed, she began to fidget. Olgan's father occupied such a large portion of her heart. To her, a father was someone towards whom she felt a mixture of fear and hatred — someone she wanted to erase from this plane as soon as possible. Still, she would have struggled to describe how she saw her father, because she acknowledged that there was something missing from her where fatherly affection was supposed to be.

"Demon Lord, did you... have a daughter?"

"Daughter? I'm single and proud of it. Why should I have a daughter?"

"I see..." Olgan couldn't help but feel relieved, somehow. Not that it was any of her business, but she was hoping for the answer he gave. "I've never heard of the Fallen Angel taking up a wife, come to think of it."

"Forget about those myths. Tell me about local stories, or about the dungeons."

"Again...?" Olgan thought for a moment. "I've told you most everything I know." The Demon Lord had been digging for local legends and dungeon stories at every chance he had. He couldn't afford to miss the opportunity to get as much information as he could from a world-class adventurer. "There are plenty of rumors... A village where all of its residents turned to salt for breaking an oath, a floating island that can only be found by those who believe in it... I've even heard that there's a sunken temple at the bottom of the Northern Sea, somewhere."

(*Castle in the Sky...*?) The Demon Lord recalled an animated film from almost a generation ago. Each of those rumors might have ignited the sense of adventure within any youngster, but the Demon Lord showed no interest in them whatsoever. The only thing that was on his mind was how he could regain more admin features. (It's like I'm flopping around with no arms and no legs...) Without those admin features, it did feel like all of his limbs had been bound. Being robbed of the features he had put in fifteen years of hard work to create was more akin to having all of his limbs torn from his body. It was almost a biological instinct for the Demon Lord to want to earn them back.

"There was a quest from Xenobia to research the Six Dungeon Waterfalls," Olgan added.

(Xenobia? Where have I heard that before...?) The Demon Lord recalled that Tahara had mentioned that name a few times. He had said that Xenobia was up to some sort of scheme, but the Demon Lord could not care less about other countries. His unwavering self-centeredness was practically part of his charm, at this point.

"Xenobia and Holylight both keep up a clean front to hide their internal bloodshed," Olgan commented.

"As a nation expands, various forces and factions will sprout. It's only natural."

The Demon Lord gave this knowing response as he was reminded of the settings he had given the old Empire. Despite occupying 60% of their world, it too had been immobilized by internal conflict, much like a beached whale. Unlike an ordinary beached whale, which could do nothing but wait for death, the Empire thrashed its tailfin, massacring countless citizens through the Game. Their seemingly eternal rule came to end when, at the hands of the players, the Sleepless Castle fell. Watching the symbol of the Empire crumble to the ground gave the scattered Résistance the push they needed to stand up. The world's events from that point on seemed inevitable. The Game's credits rolled, depicting the Empire's fall and each nation gaining their independence. The black-and-white montage made it look like those events were somehow historically factual, as well as served as the bittersweet conclusion to the Game.

(Nothing lasts forever, huh...?) The rise and fall of the Empire only took place in the Game's fictional backstory. No such place existed in reality... It was just a game, after all. At the same time, some images flashed in the Demon Lord's mind, syncing up with the eerie vision he had seen the other day: a panicked crowd, Shibuya crumbling to the ground, and *something*, with the silhouette of a human, falling into the pits of the earth. Was it all a coincidence? Or was there some hidden meaning behind it? (Oh, shake it off. It's just some vision this stupid ring showed me...) The Demon Lord noticed a pair of eyes fixated on him, and finally asked a question. "What are you going to do after you kill your father?" It was something that he had been meaning to ask.

"Never thought about it." Olgan chuckled to herself. She had never even considered it possible before.

"No plan at all? Wow."

"Even if I *can* kill him, nothing's going to change. The world will look the same as it does now, and it'll carry on all the same."

The Demon Lord didn't know how he felt about Olgan's almost nihilistic view. Nothing he could say would ease her heart. Even so, perhaps from a sense of rebellion against the catastrophic images in his head, the Demon Lord answered with something honorable for a change: "Tomorrow will be a better day than today... That's how I've lived my life, anyway."

"Oh? I never expected to hear anything like that from the Fallen Angel."

"To be honest, I wouldn't have made it if I didn't convince myself of that."

This man's life so far had been a strange one. Despite earning the praise of the masses and the glory as an artist, he had always let them slip through his fingers. There were days when he scrambled to scoop up the pieces, and nights when he cried alone over his failures. For a man who held no faith in any god, 'tomorrow will be a better day,' was a phrase, albeit a simple one, he could believe in.

His response seemed to have moved Olgan in some way. "Tomorrow will be a better day than today..." she quietly repeated. "All of those clerics who rattle on in their sermons could learn a thing or two."

“Hmph...” Having mistaken Olgan’s comment for mockery, the Demon Lord frowned and lit a cigarette. *This is what I get for being sincere for once*, he seemed to say. The Demon Lord pouting on his cigarette seemed strangely charming to Olgan.

She rushed to clear her throat. “S-Speaking of... Why were you in Holylight, and not in Hellion territory?”

“No reason, really.” The Demon Lord brushed her off. He couldn’t very well tell her that he somehow woke up there.

“I don’t understand,” Olgan continued. “Do you think the place is too dangerous with your powers sealed? Or is there some secret in Holylight that the world doesn’t know about? What do you have to gain from such a corrupt nation?”

(Hellion territory? Are you kidding me? That sounds ridiculously dangerous...)

The Demon Lord kept his comment to himself, as to not destroy the image Olgan held of him as the Demon Lord or Fallen Angel. He didn’t really understand much about Holylight to begin with, anyway. The Demon Lord recalled the Demons he had faced in this world so far. “At the very least... I can understand and sympathize with humans better than the lot of devils and Hellions.” The Demon Lord wanted to nip this ‘why don’t you live in Hellion territory?’ argument in the bud.

Olgan, however, was utterly shocked by the statement. The one who revolted against the Great Light had made a 180. “You’re not saying that... You’ll fight with the humans this time!?”

(What’s with all the ‘this time’s and ‘again’s!?) The Demon Lord could feel his cheeks twitch. The paladin had mentioned similar things to him, too. He had no clue what the correct answer was in this situation. As he was contemplating how to answer Olgan, he was met with an unexpected saving grace.

“...Apparently we have company. Let’s save the questions for later.”

“W-Wait,” Olgan looked around. “I thought no one could find this place?”

“Don’t worry, she’s the exception. She’s got Bloodhound, Hawk Eye, and Secret Agent to top it off. She’s a ninja, basically.”

While Olgan didn't understand what the Demon Lord was talking about, she grew visibly unhappy at the thought that their secure hideout had been invaded.

Soon, the culprit appeared with thunderous footsteps. "Sniffity sniff sniff! The perp's left a trail of evidence here. Ever heard of 'little grey cells,' Dear Watson?"

"What's with the verbal sucker punch of nonsense...?" The Demon Lord came walking down the stairs, audibly exasperated.

Olgan had followed the Demon Lord with a pout on her face. Akane mirrored Olgan's expression. "Hey, hey, hey! You didn't think to tell me you built a Secret Lair? You two hogging it to yourselves? No fair!"

"Didn't think anyone would find us here, but I guess it was no use with you."

"Just followed your scent, Hakuto."

"You might as well be a dog..."

"Your royal hound Akane, at your service. *Woof woof!*" She chomped at the Demon Lord's hand.

Just as the unamused Demon Lord pulled his hand away, Olgan groaned. "Let me ask you this outright. Do you serve the Fallen Angel?"

Akane blinked a few times. "Huh? You're talking about Hakuto? He's more of a fallen con artist right now."

"You're complicating things, shut up!" The Demon Lord covered Akane's mouth with his hand and contemplated his next move. It was about time he moved away from the northern parts of the nation. "I'll want to head South. Olgan, you can go back to town, and—"

"I would like to stay."

"All right. Then I'll bring that emo girl here. Show me the way, Akane."

"You know things get X-rated when you force an idol's mouth shut, Hakuto! I can't believe you were such a pervy producer after all! I'm so appalled, I bet I could barely eat more than a 12 ounce of steak!"

“How much do you eat when you’re not appalled? Just jump already.”

“Hrm... I’m going for seconds!”

As Akane went back to biting the Demon Lord’s hand, the pair Quick Traveled away. All of a sudden, the Secret Lair was met with the kind of silence that follows a storm.

“Does she ever stop yammering...?” Olgan was strangely irritated by Akane’s innocent display of affection, like a daughter goofing around with her father. “He had another woman at his command during the Invasion, too... Was she another one of his underlings?” Olgan continued to contemplate these things that she would never find an answer to here. After spending considerable time in the Secret Lair, Olgan had begun to see the Demon Lord as more than a partner in battle. In fact, the way of the Fallen Angel, who ruled the night according to legends, was one of Olgan’s aspirations. No one could have told her to stop being curious about the Demon Lord. “Is he really single...? He seemed very close to the woman he was with during the Invasion.” Eventually, Olgan’s thought processes switched to that of a daughter investigating her father’s possible affair. Of course, it was nothing more than a false accusation from the Demon Lord’s point of view.

Then, Akane returned with Mynk. “Here we are, Emo Girl!”

“My name’s Mynk! I’ve told you a thousand times! Wait, where am I!?”

“You’re not in Kansas anymore, that’s for sure!” Akane cackled, before vanishing.

Olgan called to the confused Mynk: “Why don’t you sit down?”

“Olgan? What is this place...? Is it an Anima house?”

“He called it a Secret Lair. It’s pretty comfortable.”

“Secret Lair... That makes my spine tingle.”

Mynk began looking around the Secret Lair, muttering to herself. The lair would grow on Mynk, but for a completely different reason than why it had grown on Olgan.

Meanwhile, the remaining two in the party were walking through the southern parts of the forest with comfortable strides.

The vegetation's slightly different... Seems a little drier down here, too.

It's nice and breezy in the woods, isn't it? Reminds me of the Forest areas.

It's a good climate for summer.

Now that there was no need to cause a diversion, they were speaking via Communication. Just to be sure, they had sprayed themselves with the deodorizer.

Hey, Hakuto. It's summer right now in this world, right?

Apparently.

Then get some summer events going! We can do all sorts of festivals at the village you were talking about, Hakuto.

Just when the Demon Lord was about to brush off the idea, he realized that festivals were used throughout history, and in more modern times, for rulers to alleviate the stress and built-up dissatisfaction of their people. Besides, any sort of event or festival stimulated the economy. Akane's intentions aside, that was by no means a terrible idea.

Depends on the nature of the festivals, but—

Keep being wishy-washy like that, and summer will fly by before you know it, Hakuto! We can crack some watermelon, shoot up some romantic fireworks, wear bathing suits that push the boundaries of our rating, a little bit of Isekai, a little bit of looped time travel... Summer is the season for DLC and microtransactions.

You lost me towards the end there.

The Demon Lord nearly chuckled at the fact that Akane was treating this like a dating sim. Her ideas and actions were entirely free-spirited, thanks to her backstory as an extroverted geek.

And in winter we'll do a Christmas party! Ooh, and decorate a big tree!

Didn't I tell you? Christmas is canceled again this year.

What do you mean again? Winter's just cold without Christmas!

What is life but an arctic wasteland? Even as they exchanged goofy banter, the Demon Lord thoroughly observed his surroundings. The southern parts of the forest were also home to an abundance of vegetation and creeks. This place could sustain a large population... Huge difference from Eastern Holylight.

C'mon, let's do Christmas. I'm sure everyone will be too intimidated to be your date, Hakuto, but don't worry. Akane to the rescue! Don't you want to spend Christmas Eve with a gorgeous superstar?

What unimaginably heinous crime have I committed to deserve that punishment?

Meanie... Fine then, spend your Christmas alone! Don't come crying to me then!

Like I said, Christmas is canceled.

La-la-la-la-la, can't hear you!

Watching Akane cover her ears and silently scream over him, the Demon Lord let out a relenting chuckle. She was just as stubborn as he had designed, perhaps even more. She was a free-spirited girl with endless energy who shone like the sun.

She's loud, but at least she's never boring?

Suddenly, a question came to the Demon Lord's mind. Did he not used to share this sort of banter with a certain someone, once upon a time...? He tried to remember who that person was, but he couldn't dig past a wall of white fog on his mind.

Hey, hey, Hakuto, I forgot to ask you. What's up with my salary?

The Demon Lord halted his contemplation in light of the new subject.

...I think I'll pay you in contraband.

What am I, an underground laborer!?

In Zimbabwean dollars, then.

Where am I supposed to spend those!?

The Demon Lord continued to enjoy their back-and-forth as they continued strolling through the woods. Behind all the jest, Akane seemed to be enjoying herself, too, as she seemed to have a bigger pep in her step.

Hey, Hakuto, why don't you make a Secret Lair down here, too?

We don't need two of them.

This one'll be for me and you! Totally different from the other one!

It's a waste of SP. Watch where you walk, by the way.

What do you mean, waste!? This is why your— Ow!

—Survival Skill: Mint Master

Akane, who had been walking backwards, slammed into a tree headfirst. Just as the Demon Lord was about to hit her with an *I told you so*, his grin froze.

Huh? Akane let out. *Something fell on me... Hey, isn't this a coin—*

"Show me that, Akane!"

"Woah!"

The Demon Lord shouted and ran over to her, forgetting the fact that they had been speaking via Communication, and snatched the object from her hand. He held a single coin, one that he had long awaited for. It was an Empire Mint, a coin that shone in different colors depending on the angle the light hit it. This coin, marked with an infinity symbol, had been an extremely rare item back in the game.

"Hah, ha— I, never, expected...!" the Demon Lord squeezed through his over-excited panting.

The up-tempo jingle he had long dreamed about now echoed in his head.

—Congratulations.

You've unlocked Cash In.

"Oh... Yes! Yes! Finally! Another skill! Another feature! I'm regaining my powers! Rah ha ha ha! Look at me now, you little moron! This is what you get for messing with my powers!"

The Demon Lord shouted, scaring off a few birds and small creatures. Even Akane was dumbfounded by his insane cries of joy.

Heyyy, Hakuto. Don't forget we're square in the middle of enemy terr— ah!?

The Demon Lord embraced Akane's body without hesitation. It was akin to a trainer embracing his athlete at the Olympics after she set a new world record.

"Amazing...! Amazing work, Akane!" the Demon Lord praised her.

Akane's body began to tremble. She could feel the elation of her Creator. Her eyes widened, and her face turned bright red.

"Your Mint Master ability must have triggered! That thing ups the rate of earning Mints through events! Yeah, you could find them on dead bodies, but no one had a medal in this world for you to—"

As the Demon Lord only escalated in tone and volume, Akane gently reciprocated his embrace by wrapping her arms around his waist.

She sent him a Communication, like she was whispering sweet nothings into her lover's ear. *Hakuto, we need to Communicate right now... Right?*

Hm? R-Right... Of course.

The Demon Lord rushed to release Akane, who suddenly seemed more mature than ever. Akane flashed a disappointed look for an instant before squeezing her eyes shut. When she opened them, she was wearing her signature high-energy smile again.

I can't believe it made you so happy, Hakuto. I'm gonna brag to everyone about it.

The Demon Lord let out a dry laugh in return, embarrassed for getting so carried away.

(But how could there be a Mint in this forest... I mean, the Mint Master ability was active in every area except the Sleepless Castle... Does that mean it triggers like an event in this world, too?) Once the Demon Lord calmed down, some questions were raised in his mind, and he definitely wanted to test out his theories. (It's possible that Akane can find Mints from traveling or searching, too.)

This was a great ray of hope for the Demon Lord. Until this point, he had no idea how to obtain Mints.

—Command: Cash In

The Demon Lord selected Cash In from the admin screen to find a list of nostalgic items for him; an array of short-range weapons, such as Rusty Sword (Cut), Shard of Glass (Stab), Metal Pipe (Club), and Boxer's Gloves (Blunt). Each of their attacks were 1, the worst possible. These were mainly used by players to proc their Equipped skills when their main weapons had been destroyed or robbed. After the list of weapons, there were items like Trap Set, Poison, and Neutralizer.

(The nostalgia's all fine, but I can't get crap with just a single coin...) The Demon Lord scratched his head, torn between excitement and irritation.

After watching the Demon Lord for a while, Akane decided to drop a bomb.

Oh, right. I got a Communication from Yu yesterday.

...What did she say? the Demon Lord asked, secretly nervous about the nature of their conversation.

'Make sure not to get in the Secretary's way!' All high-and-mighty, just cause she's a little smarter, or whatever. Just thinking of her stupid, emotionless face makes me— rrrrk! Just... rrrrk!

Easy, now. Yu's gotten much softer since coming here.

...She's not softer at all. Akane's expression vanished, either because of her wild instincts or feminine instincts.

I understand you two don't click, but try to get along.

Yu would... The Yu right now would do anything for you, Hakuto...

The shine in Akane's eyes faded. It was an eerie sight, precisely because Akane's expression had always changed at the drop of a hat, according to her rapid shifts in emotion.

Wait, wait, wait. What are you talking about?

Yu's much scarier than before. I think so, anyway.

The Demon Lord couldn't help but gulp down a wad of saliva. He felt like he was being faced with something terrible.

But I kind of understand how Yu feels, Akane added. You've changed a lot, Hakuto. It's fun just being around you. Just getting a reaction out of you makes me happy.

What are you saying? You didn't eat something weird off the ground, did you?

I know I'm stupid, but I've thought about it a few times... That I was trapped in a world that someone had created. I was always begging for someone to let me out of that terrible world.

Just tell me what you're talking about—

But that someone never answered my pleas...

The Demon Lord slowly closed his eyes as Akane's unwavering eyes became unbearable. While he had controlled his gesture to come across as a sign of calm, he was internally sweating bullets.

But now, I think that someone did hear me. They might even answer me.

A-All right. That sounds great—

At first, I didn't really like that person... I actually hated them. 'Why'd you put me in this world!?' But as time passed, I began to understand that person, little by little. That they love me... in a funny way.

Akane remained ruthlessly expressionless, making the Demon Lord fear for every word that came out of her mouth. Watching her, he was expecting her to say 'So let's die together, Hakuto,' any minute.

(Crap, crap, crap... I don't understand what's happening, but holy crap...!)

It was a genuine fear of Akira Ono that the advisors would find out that he was not Hakuto Kunai. He couldn't foresee how Yu or Tahara, or even the Akane before him now, would react to such a revelation. Akira believed that no one but the Demon Lord of the Empire, who stood atop a mountain of over four million deaths and infinite bloodshed, could control his advisors.

Calm down, Akane. We're still in enemy territory... Huh?

When the Demon Lord averted his gaze in search of any means to divert Akane's attention from his identity, he spotted something incredible. It was a *torii*, the gate used in Shinto shrines... something Akira Ono was very familiar with.

A God's Realm

"What the hell is that doing here...?" the Demon Lord couldn't help but blurt out.

A *torii* was nothing he had expected to see in a fantastical world, much less without warning.

Hmm? Real strange, huh? Akane asked, bending at her waist and peering into the Demon Lord's face.

She seemed to be more curious about the Demon Lord's reaction than the *torii* that had suddenly appeared. At the moment, nothing but Hakuto Kunai was of any concern to her.

I'm going to go scout it out, Akane. Go back to the base now.

No can do. What if something happened to you, Hakuto? I—

That's an order, Akane.

Mm. Still...

While the Demon Lord did want to escape Akane's questioning, in part, he had felt a strong sense of déjà vu upon seeing the *torii*... A strange space in the middle of a thick forest. He sensed something similar to the Shrine of Wishes where he had encountered the Still Angel.

(There is some clue in this forest...)

He couldn't allow Akane to discover anything related to the Still Angel. The Demon Lord shuddered to imagine the doom that loomed beyond Akane figuring out his identity.

Hey, Hakuto... When I was exploring the woods, I heard something interesting.

What is it...?

The Demon Lord feared to imagine what piece of information she could have acquired. With her Secret Agent ability, Akane naturally picked up on all sorts of things, whether she liked it or not. It was a very ninja-like ability that improved her detection rates and stealth. The ability did often come in handy, but the Demon Lord could see that it was clearly working against him in this case.

I heard that there are bad guys over to the east who sell and bully people.

Oh... That's, uh, you know, very bad.

R-Right!? I'm bad at just waiting around, so... If it's okay with you, Hakuto, I thought I'd go look into that... maybe?

Y-Yes. Taking initiative and making your own decisions is the first step in joining the workforce.

The Demon Lord barely managed to blow some thinly veiled smoke in an attempt to get Akane away from him as quickly as possible.

Oblivious to his intentions, Akane cheerfully returned a thumbs-up. *Okie dokie! I'll take the little emo girl with me, too!*

Yes. I'm looking forward to good news.

With that, the Demon Lord leapt away, as if to run from his advisor.

Akane watched him disappear into the forest, before moving her lips ever so slightly. At this distance, the Demon Lord had no way of knowing what she had uttered... which was most likely a blessing. If someone were to read her lips, they might have heard a faint 'found you...'

(I finally got away...) With cold sweat running down his back, the Demon Lord continued to head towards the *torii*. He shuddered to imagine what might have happened if he had to endure much more of Akane's eerie inquisition. (I definitely can't let my guard down in front of any of the advisors... I wish Aku was here...) The Demon Lord thought of the girl who had always welcomed him with a gentle smile. She was the only person in this world he could be himself around. (Should I send Aku a Communication later? It wouldn't be bad to jump back to the village...) As the Demon Lord imagined loafing around with Aku, he was met with a sudden urge to be lazy. In part because he just kept thinking

about Aku, for some reason. He had come north not only for his own safety, but because he had more people to protect. (Why do I care so much about her...?)

The Demon Lord decided to think all about Aku, the first girl he had met in this alternate world. A kind-hearted, innocent girl who even played along with stupid goofs, too. She admired him, like he was a father figure to her. (It might be natural to want to protect such a nice girl... but I'm not her dad, or anything like it.) They had no relation, strictly speaking. Moreover, the Demon Lord was well aware that he did not have a shred of fatherly instinct. He was a tyrannical artist, through and through, with nothing but the pursuit of his own world on his mind. He simply did not require anyone else in his life. Even so, his mind latched onto Aku like she was an exception. He sometimes even felt like it was his duty, and even his life's purpose, to protect her. (Bizarre. Maybe I'm finally old enough to have grown some fatherly bones...)

The Demon Lord gazed up at the *torii* that now stood above him. Just as he took a step forward, he froze.

“What the...? I'm out of Stealth Stance...!?”

Before he knew it, he was visible again.

A voice rang in the Demon Lord's ears as he stood there dumbfounded. “You were the one making all of that noise in my realm...” It was a divine voice that lingered with him.

The Demon Lord scouted his surroundings, but couldn't find who the voice belonged to. Only familiar Shinto shrine architecture lay beyond the *torii*.

“Excuse my intrusion. I just saw something nostalgic...”

The Demon Lord continued to search for what the voice had come from. Apparently, it was coming from a structure past the *torii* that resembled a main shrine building.

“Nostalgic? How strange... Oh, and your little disappearing trick won't work in my realm. What say you, you uninvited guest?”

(Not an easy one to deal with. Got it.)

The Demon Lord wanted to snarl at having his form revealed. It felt like his

world was being eroded.

“I would have guessed that you were the intruder who’s been making a ruckus out here... but I wouldn’t have pegged you for a human.” The voice had a mix of exasperation and amusement.

The Demon Lord couldn’t grasp what the owner of the voice was thinking. “One question, if you don’t mind,” he called out. “This is a *torii*, and that’s a Shinto shrine over there, right?”

“Oh... How intriguing. Now, where did you learn such ancient knowledge... Hmm, I see.”

“You see, what?”

“I can smell the hatred of the dead on you. An awful stench. Ordinarily, a heinous being like you would have never gotten close to my realm. But now, it makes sense.”

The Demon Lord started to get irritated at listening to this pseudo-monologue. They weren’t exactly having a cohesive conversation. The Demon Lord decided to stop asking questions and listen.

“I don’t really understand what you mean, but let’s hear it.”

“Your ring. I sense the power of that wretched Still Angel. Even after you’ve fallen so long, your power is rooted in the Angels...”

“You know...!” The Demon Lord’s expression shifted as his suspicion was confirmed. Whomever it was that he was talking to, they seemed to know details about the Still Angel. “Dammit. I’ve got a thousand questions I want to ask. Would you mind showing yourself? I bear no animosity or ill intentions.” The Demon Lord casually raised his hands in a display of benevolence.

However, he received a harsh response from within the shrine: “Yeah, right. Have you ever looked into a mirror? You have a face that *epitomizes* evil. I can’t let my guard down for a second around you. Even a devil would run for the hills.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover!”

Even though the Demon Lord had voiced a reasonable opinion for a change, it

held no weight in light of his face and the eerie long coat. He looked precisely like a mafia don who ruled the city by night.

“I’m rather exhausted, I’m sorry to say. I am content in knowing that you don’t work for that devil. Now, hurry up and leave. You know what? Get out. You got a scary face.”

“Shut up about my face!”

The Demon Lord approached the shrine, pretty annoyed by this point. Then, two silhouettes leapt out of the shrine. One belonged to a boy wearing blue, and the other to a girl wearing red. However, both of the children had large ears on their heads and a tail on their behinds.

(Young... Fox-hybrids...?)



The Demon Lord was taken aback by their appearances at first, but understood that they must have been of a similar species to the Bunnies. After encountering the ape-hybrid and the kappa, the Demon Lord seemed to have gotten more used to the idea of Animas.

“Hey, you evil-looking human! Stay away from mother!”

“B-Brother’s right! I’ve never seen such an evil face on anyone before!”

“You little punks...!” The Demon Lord’s wrath was on the brink of exploding, when he remembered that no one else had designed his face like this. He was reaping exactly what he had sown. “My name is Hakuto Kunai... Don’t be so on edge. Why don’t we begin with introductions?”

The Demon Lord managed to contain his anger and maintain the façade of an understanding adult. What was the point of getting mad at two fox-hybrids who seemed to be children? The foxes turned back to the shrine for a few moments. Then, the fox clad in blue raised one foot, and struck a strange pose: “Hear well, human! I am no other... than the Shocking Iceberg on the Horizon, Blue Fox!”

“Are you trying out for the WWE?”

The child clad in red seemed to not have practiced her pose as much, unable to keep her balance on one foot. If they were in combat instead of their introduction stage, they would not have stood a chance.

“L-Listen up! I’m the Inevitable Burn-out, Fire Fox!”

“And you’re an internet browser.”

“Y-You got a problem with our names!?” Fire Fox demanded.

“You both burnt out before you even started,” the Demon Lord retaliated, in revenge for the children mocking his face. All in all, their introductions served no purpose in building their trust whatsoever.

“Mother!” Blue Fox cried out. “I knew it! He’s an evil human with a stupid evil face!”

“Brother is right! He made fun of my name, too!”

The Demon Lord groaned at the scene that reminded him of first-grade

homeroom. It didn't seem like he would have a chance to ask a lot of questions about the Still Angel or their shrine.

"All right, why don't we wrap up the comedy routine? May I ask you a few questions? Anything you know about the Still Angel. And why is there a shrine in a place like this?"

"Mother is tired! That devil's caused enough trouble as—"

Blue Fox's snarl was interrupted by a sound reminiscent of shattering glass from above. Part of the sky had cracked open, and a strange creature peeked its head through the cracks from the black void beyond it.

"What up, what up, Ancient beasties? I came to play! I think your front door needs some oil, though!"

Kale, the high-rank devil, jumped down to the ground. Despite his childlike stature, the baleful scythe in his hand reminded the Demon Lord of Death. At first glance, he could tell that Kale was no ordinary creature.

(Who the hell is this...? Is he with the fox-hybrids?)

As the Demon Lord poised to watch what would happen next, a scream came from within the shrine.

The voice seemed disturbed, now. "Both of you, hurry! Come to me...!"

"Too slow!" Kale chimed in. "Blue one's mine!"

"Mo— agh!"

In an instant, the Blue Fox's back was split open from the swing of Kale's scythe, and a terrible amount of blood came gushing out. Fire Fox watched with an empty expression for a moment, before crying out as the redness filled her vision.

"Brother...? Brother!"

"Hur...ry... Run..." Blue Fox squeezed out.

The Demon Lord was standing with his mouth agape. He was taken by surprise from the all-too-sudden attack and Kale's childish appearance. Fire Fox desperately tried to pull Blue Fox towards the shrine, but Kale was too fast.

“No dice! Off with your head, Red!”

As Kale swung his giant scythe, another scream echoed from the shrine. The scythe, however, swung and missed, striking nothing but air. The Demon Lord had grabbed Kale by the back of his neck and yanked him backwards.

“That’s a little sharp for a kid’s toy.”

“Woah, woah, woah! C’mon! I was going to play with you later, human. But if you get in my way—” Kale’s eyes shifted from a vile smile to the glare of a demon. “I smell that fucking angel on you...! It’s f-frying my head...”

The Demon Lord ignored the comment, and tossed Kale aside like a dodgeball. His incredible strength caused the high-rank devil to bounce through the shrine grounds.

“I guess he was famous, after all. I got a lot of questions to ask you, kid.”

The Demon Lord started smoking a cigarette with disregard to the sanctity of the shrine. In fact, he feared no god.

“A human that smells like the Still Angel...? Wait, there’s something... else? The smell! This smell! Smell, smell, smell! *Hee-ragh hahahaha!*” Kale cackled like a broken toy, repeatedly slamming his hands onto the ground. It was anyone’s guess as to what made him so overjoyed, but overjoyed he was. “I can’t believe it! No, really! I never thought someone like you would exist! Fuck! I want to kill you... tear off your ears, tear off your nose... munch on those eyeballs... No, no, no! That’d be such a waste! I *have* to make you my pet! I’ve been trying really hard not to break my toys right away! Bad! Bad! Bad!”

As Kale continued his mad ramblings, the Demon Lord let out a long exhale. Kale’s disturbing threats didn’t seem to bother him. “Right, right, right! I forgot to do introductions. I’m a high-rank devil, the name’s Kale. ‘Sup. My hobbies are killing stuff and torturing stuff... I think we’ll get along!”

“You high, or something?” the Demon Lord groaned.

Kale jumped to his feet with a brimming smile. “Aha hahahaha! Oh yeah, I’m high. As high as high can be!” Cackling, Kale swung his scythe like a bolt of lightning, which never reached the Demon Lord. It was perfectly neutralized by Assault Queller, which appeared with the trustworthy *ping*.

“...Huh?” Kale muttered. “What is th—”

The Demon Lord’s front kick, practically a stomp, hit Kale square in the abdomen. He was blown away like a soccer ball, vomiting copious amounts of blood.

“Agghhhh...! C-Can’t, breathe... Ow! Ow ow ow ow ow ow owwww!”

“I’ll beat your snot-nose into the ground anytime,” the Demon Lord declared, putting his cigarette butt out in his portable ashtray.

Kale struggled to his feet as he clasped his gut, but his legs were shaking like a newborn deer from the damage. “What are y— Agh!”

The Demon Lord strode over and slapped the devil with incredible force. Kale writhed on the ground.

“I’ll count this as a learning opportunity for you, you little shit. There won’t be a next time. I believe all felons should be tried as adults.”

The Demon Lord returned to the shrine. Fire Fox was desperately calling to Blue Fox, but his breathing was already faint, his eyes slowly closing.

“I’m sorry...” their mother cried. “If I could be out there...!”

“Brother! Brother! Please! Open your eyes!”

“Move.” The Demon Lord pushed Fire Fox out of the way without much care and produced a bottle of water from the void. He flipped the cap open and poured the bottle’s contents onto the back of Blue Fox. His face immediately gained some color, but his bleeding showed no sign of stopping.

A quiet voice called from within the shrine. “I am sorry, dear guest... Those wounded by that devil’s scythe are cursed. No amount of herbs or Holy magic can stop the bleeding. Please, let him go in peace...”

The Demon Lord noticed a black aura oozing from around the wound. Indeed, it didn’t seem like any ordinary injury. No amount of healing would do any good if the bleeding wouldn’t stop. In a literal sense, Kale wielded the scythe of Death.

“Cursed...? How annoying. Should have clocked that little shit in the face a

few more times.” With a frown, the Demon Lord reached into the void again. “Craft Novice Item... **Onusa**.” He produced a Shinto wand, fashioned from a stick and ribbons of papers. The wand was used in real-world Shinto shrines to cleanse people or objects, and this item was used in the Game to negate lesser curses. “Uh... Glory to God, something something... whatever.”

With that pathetic excuse for a prayer, the Demon Lord waved the Onusa. While his attitude might have been fiercely offensive to any legitimate Shinto priest, the action made the black miasma fade from Blue Fox’s wound.

An amazed cry came from within the shrine, before her tone changed to disappointment. “Even with that mysterious force...”

The once-faded affliction had regained its strength as if it was digging deeper into the wound.

Kale, who had been quivering in shame, began to loudly cackle. “Aha hahaha! You thought you stood a chance against *my* scythe with that little thing!? The kid’s gonna die! Death is the only way out for anyone I get my hands on! That future’s already written!”

Fire Fox glared at Kale as the Demon Lord laughed. Something seemed to have lit a fire within him.

“‘That little thing,’ huh...? Interesting. Let’s put your cheap scythe to the test against *my* world.”

The Demon Lord stuck his hand into the black void once again to produce the next item in his arsenal: an Advanced item called the Altar of Decursing, which broke curses of any severity. The moment the Demon Lord held the item over Blue Fox, a blinding light emanated from it, and the afflicted air around his wound shriveled away and dissipated. Witnessing this unimaginable sight, sobs could be heard from within the shrine, and Fire Fox jumped in joy.

“I-I can’t believe it...!”

“Brother! Brother, are you all right!?”

“Erm... I feel... better...” Pain had faded from Blue Fox’s expression as he smiled at his sister with relief.

While this heartwarming interaction was taking place, the Demon Lord was being his same old self.

“Gahaha! Hey, you little shit! What’s that about the future being pre-written and all that shit? How’s it feel, huh? I’ll lend you my ear, just this once. Tell me how it feels. As long as it takes, really.”

“You... will pay... for this...! You... will pay!”

“Dah hahaha! Yes! I could not have groveled better if I tried! Pray tell, who taught you how to be so utterly pathetic? Or did you eat a devil fruit that turned you into a *complete loser*!?” The Demon Lord threw one immature insult and reference after another, laughing his rear end off. While the effects of Kale’s scythe could only be dealt with by high-level magical items or the Curseproof effect, it was rendered completely useless by this man. “Hey, Red. Give this to the blue one.” He produced another bottle of water and tossed it at Fire Fox. He seemed to be in a particularly generous mood.

“D-Don’t just call us by our color!”

“Now, you little shit.” The Demon Lord turned to Kale again, ready to interrogate him. “I’ve got a few questions for... hm?”

A giant pumpkin had appeared on the ground by Kale, which was trying to swallow the devil whole. The pumpkin had a face like a Jack O’ Lantern, which looked rather eerie outside of Halloween time.

“What is that thing...?” the Demon Lord mumbled.

“I won’t, forget you...!” Kale growled. “I will... have my revenge... mark my words.”

—Magical Item: **Prodigal Return**

Soon, Kale completely disappeared from the grounds, swallowed up by the pumpkin. Everyone on the scene stood still, staring where the devil had been, dumbfounded.

Eventually, a relieved voice came from the shrine. “We’re alive, somehow... Thank you, dear unexpected guest. Now thank him, children.”

“H-Hmph...” Blue Fox averted his gaze. “You’re not... entirely useless. You

know, for a human.”

“I will not thank this meanie human!” Fire Fox declared.

“You could really use a parenting lesson,” the Demon Lord muttered, turning to the interior of the shrine. The voice he had heard sounded feminine, but the ‘mother’ of the fox children had yet to show herself. “Now that the intruder’s gone, can I ask you some questions?”

“I apologize... I’m nearly spent... from maintaining the barrier... I must mend the crack, that the devil pierced in it.”

“Barrier?”

“If we meet again... you will see... my full display of gratitude...”

“H-Hey!” Just as the Demon Lord cried out, his vision distorted, assaulting him with a violent spout of dizziness. When he came to, not a single trace of the shrine was anywhere to be seen. “Dammit! What the hell was all of that...?”

The entire interaction seemed to have been a waste of his time. The only thing he could take away from it was that the ruler of the shrine knew the Still Angel.

(What a bizarre place...) As soon as he was brought out of Stealth Stance, the shrine grounds had appeared out of nowhere, and now they had disappeared just as suddenly. There were areas that acted this way in the Game, but the Demon Lord was completely shocked by the fact that it was a Shinto shrine. (There were shrines in the Game... In fact, that’s vital to Tahara’s backstory.) From seeing the red and blue fox, the Demon Lord was reminded of an early backstory for Tahara. He had run away from home with his sister and ended up at a shrine, penniless and hungry. For a short while before joining the Sleepless Castle, Tahara had spent a peaceful time with his sister there. (Is it just a coincidence? Wait, why is there a shrine in this fantasy world, anyway...?) It felt like the deeper he contemplated the matter, the more confusing it became. The word ‘barrier’ had stuck with the Demon Lord, too. It was reminiscent of the Holy Castle that stood in the center of the Holy City. (Luna said something about needing at least one Holy Maiden to maintain the barrier, or something.) Luna must have tried to prove the importance of her status, but the comment had already become a distant memory for the Demon Lord. (Anyway... Maybe I

should take Tahara and check on Luna.) The Demon Lord sent a Communication, choosing to act before getting lost in his thoughts any further.

The Demon Lord had no way of knowing that his textbook lack of foresight would trigger an unexpected conflict in the near future.

Ruination and the Sun

I was dreaming

Of golden days gone by,

Joy making up for lack of coin,

Running through the slums

Until the sun sank in the sky,

Still, the sun by my side never set.

“You’re always going to be a loser if you keep giving up before you try!” the sun shouted.

Eagle awoke. Not in the Holy City, but in a cold, stone room. Wind blew through cracks in the walls to wick away Eagle’s body temperature, not even a single blanket in the room. Luna, whom Eagle had called her sun, kept shouting at her in her mind.

“Even in my dreams, you’re as ruthless as ever...”

Ever since she was separated from Luna, Eagle’s life had been nothing short of tragic. While she was set to be executed, her charge was lowered to exile by the decision of a woman called Gran. While it might have been the most merciful act Gran could get away with, the exile only served as the catalyst for Eagle’s suffering. With a minuscule amount of coins given to her on her way out, Eagle wandered from one land to another, stealing and being stolen from along the way. She lived among the poor and desperate, spending night after night in the unsheltered cold. The journey was much too severe for a child her age. With barely anything to eat, Eagle wandered from city to city like a beggar. Her only hope in life came from the rumors she occasionally heard about the Golden

Holy Maiden.

(You were the only light in my miserable life...)

As Eagle resourcefully survived among the poorest of the poor, with nothing but that faint light lingering within her heart, ruination came all too suddenly. Her hawk-hybrid traits were suddenly realized as she matured, and she sprouted a pair of inconcealable wings on her back. The rest of the slums feared her, and started to stone Eagle whenever they saw her on the street, as if they had forgotten the comradery they had shown towards her even the day before. Being chased away by city guards and never making it into another city, Eagle wandered the wastelands like a thief on the run until she found herself living a beastly life in a cave.

The nation of the Anima, which Eagle had heard about in rumors, was quite a distance from her, one she could have never reached with her weak physique. After days of solitary life, practically surviving on morning dew, ruination came once again. The Knights' Order from the Tzardom of Light, who worshiped the Great Light and had vowed to exterminate all devils, heretics, and demi-humans, had come after her.

(Hunting down demi-humans that aren't fully developed must be an attractive job to them...) A bitter taste curdled within Eagle. In fact, a team of lavishly-decorated knights in red had hunted her down just to score some brownie points within their Tzardom. As they hunted Eagle, they foolishly pillaged the neighboring villages under the guise of investigation, and set ablaze any settlement that showed resistance. (I'm sorry... I'm sorry...!) Eagle apologized countless times. Perhaps to those villagers, or perhaps for just being alive. The red knights burned down one innocent village after another, leaving roaring red flames in their wake. After seeing that hellscape, Eagle knew that she had no safe space left in this continent.

(I tried your 'not giving up' thing, you know...?) Eagle gave this excuse to the small sun burning in her mind. The sun remained silent, but Eagle remembered what Luna used to say, nonetheless: 'you're just not trying hard enough.' (But even across the sea...) As if she was making a case for herself, Eagle continued to reminisce.

After departing the continent, she risked her life crossing the sea to arrive at the Island Legion, composed of numerous islands. No civilization in the Legion accepted demi-humans, either, but Eagle managed to settle down in one of the many — at least on record — uninhabited isles. The few islanders that shared the land with Eagle were too poor or too scared to try messing with her, turning a blind eye to her residency.

(It was actually fun back then...) Eagle had flown around the island to find food and water, as well as a cave that could serve as her shelter. Sometimes, she even took after the fishermen and found herself marine life to eat. With adequate meals, she rapidly grew into that of a full-fledged hawk-hybrid. The wings on her back majestically spread, and her legs became far more powerful than those of humans. By diving down from above and unleashing a kick, she could smash a boulder into pieces. The occasional carnivorous predators of the island stood no chance of reaching Eagle as she soared through the air. She had become the ruler of the sky. As her identity became solidified, Eagle could accept and forgive herself for the first time in her life. Not that she had anyone to verbalize this to, but she would have proudly declared to anyone that she was the Holy Maiden's handmaid.

(That's when the storm came, wasn't it...?) After quite some time of non-interaction with the other islanders, Eagle had slowly begun to form a sort of relationship with them, especially after she saved a fisherman from his capsized ship on a stormy night. It certainly helped that she was dealing with islanders who lived simple lives, isolated from large civilizations. Their relationship grew from trading meat and fruit for clothes, until the fisherman she had saved built her a small cabin in gratitude. After that, Eagle began fishing with the fishermen. When there were big catches, she joined the celebrations. When boars and bears came down to the settlement, she took care of them. All in all, she was living a fulfilled life, regaining the days she had lost.

Fate, however, remained a cruel mistress. Ruination seemed to be her destiny, and it was one that never relented in chasing after her. A fleet of Tzardom ships came to the islands to eliminate and convert any heretics they came across. The red knights rode onto shore, and without any way to defend themselves, the islanders were captured or killed in the blink of an eye, and the

island was set ablaze. Her paradise had fallen, and hell resumed its place. Despite Eagle's desperate stand against the knights, their advantage in numbers prevailed, capturing and enslaving her.

(I'm tired of running...) Once she was captured by the knights of the Tzardom, who saw all demi-humans as enemies to their god, she had given up all hope on life. So, just as she was captured, she proudly declared with a smile on her face and her head high... that she was the Holy Maiden's handmaid.

"Wakey wakey, demi-human. Time for the final act." A voice interrupted Eagle's recollection. She opened her eyes to find a commander of the Tzardom wearing a grimace. "The bishop has returned. We're going to publicly crucify you before heading to Hellion territory. You'll get a cheering crowd on your way out." He grabbed Eagle by the hair and stood her up. His face was lit with a revolting mix of abhorrence and lust. "Tsk. You look quite fine on the outside, if only you weren't a filthy demi-human..."

"You look much filthier to me."

The sound of bone hitting bone made a heavy thud as the commander clocked Eagle in the face. She spat out blood in the same spot as usual, dark on the ground from being beaten too often.

"Watch your mouth, demi-human. Be a good toy for those devils." Yanking Eagle's hair, the commander dragged her out of the room.

Although she couldn't bring herself to walk, Eagle had to ask: "What did you do with them?"

"Huh? Guess they were taken to the slave market with the crew of the ship."

"You and your men are the real devils."

"Didn't get enough of a beating, huh?" The commander began striking Eagle in the face for a while, forcing her mouth shut. He cracked a victorious grin once Eagle became motionless. "Even you demi-human trash will serve as steps in my ladder... Maybe I should even thank you."

Just as another cruel scene was about to begin, two groups were approaching Suneo. One was the Buy-Out Caravan led by Luna and Harts, the other was a horde of Satanists clad in their eerie garbs, oozing out of the ground.

——Near Suneo in the Northern Nations.

Villagers swarmed the caravan at each destination, causing a ruckus at every stop. If they brought something to the caravan, it would be bought. To the villagers, that was worth dropping their jobs for the day. Harts had watched this madness ensue with mixed emotions. He had seen an old woman bring a basket full of radishes on her back, children bringing their homemade bamboo toys... each place they visited had been chaotic.

(The lack of young men could be attributed to the war season...) Harts gathered. Many of the farmlands they had passed on their journey had been worn down.

Young men were scared as they were drafted away from labor in the village. To most people, a caravan that bought anything with cash on the spot was a dream come true.

“This hemp is our village’s specialty.”

“This is our homemade egg oil... Would you be interested in this?”

“Mademoiselle Butterfly, this sapphire is the most prized jewel of our shop.”

Various people came up to them with just as varying pieces. Harts couldn’t help but feel a strong sense of déjà vu. The massive gathering, the people leaving with joyful smiles...

(This is just like the time *he* came to Holylight...) Harts remembered the paladin from the Tzardom of Light. Weeb had only toured various parts of Holylight to give out hot meals, but even the Satanists had been silent during his stay. While the Satanists most likely feared the catastrophic backlash from the masses rather than the immediate danger that Weeb posed, the paladin had undoubtedly eased the tensions within the country. (One distributes meals while the other only consumes... They’re contrasting, yet...) While their actions could not have been more different, their massive scales had both resulted in spreading joy to the locals. Even Harts, as much as he criticized the Madam, couldn’t argue with the results.

“The rich and the poor...” With the tough economy of the north in mind, Harts

couldn't help but ruminate aloud.

The Madam's elderly butler heard this, and humbly bowed to Harts. "Thanks to your protection, Sir Harts, we can travel our route with security."

"Drop the flattery. This caravan doesn't need any more protection." In fact, whenever the caravan arrived somewhere, the local lords or ladies had begun to voluntarily station their knights around the crowd, albeit at a distance, to keep the peace. "Look at them. It's like they're guarding their very lord."

"We've sent the news ahead to the lords and ladies on our route, for their consideration." The butler diffused Hart's sarcastic remark. He didn't serve the Madam for nothing.

"When the people get richer, so too do their rulers. People seem relieved from their day-to-day stress with an income boost like this." As he noted these things, a scary thought crossed Harts' mind. If the Madam decided to take her caravan on a tour through Holylight, particularly through the harsh north, Harts wouldn't stand a chance.

"Our lady is rarely affected by monetary concerns... Much to my dismay." The butler smiled, with no sign of dismay.

The madness unfolding around them was a mere portion of the buy-out on this stop. Members of the Butterfly clan had already spread through the land, purchasing food, building materials, clothes, delicacies, accessories, jewelry, and more, all in massive quantities from each settlement. Of course, all of those goods were being transported to the village of Rabbi. Carriages by the hundreds went up and down the travel road they had come.

The Madam was gathering various materials in preparation for the boom in population and noble guests at Rabbi, as well as spending all of her income from her stake in the resort business. She was concerned that, if she merely lined her pockets with the money and gifts she acquired from her referrals to the resort, the Demon Lord or his advisors might grow to distrust her. She felt much more secure investing all of that income back into the village. Besides, the Madam was one of the richest tycoons on the continent — she had no need to save pocket change. If any other noble had been in her position, they might have scrambled to further their riches until they were 'taken care of' by Yu or

Tahara. The financial successes the Demon Lord's group was experiencing at present stemmed entirely from his decision to choose the Madam as his partner in the resort business. However, one could more accurately attribute his success to his ridiculously strong luck.

"Concerns, you say?" Harts countered. "That's the strength of the rich, isn't it? And also their weakness."

"Weakness?" the butler asked, although he knew what Harts was implying.

"Poverty makes us stronger. Warriors are not born out of wealth and privilege."

"I see... It makes sense." In any world, the rich and city-born soldiers lacked in comparison to the poor soldiers from the country. The epitome of people's environments shaping their nature. "Thanks to you and the other military nobles, us citizens of Holylight can rest easy and tend to our own work. We can not do enough to show our gratitude."

"You may think so, sir, but I wonder if the same could be said about your master."

The butler remained silent for some time, before answering with gravitas. "Indeed, our lady used to only see herself in this world."

"You say she doesn't now?"

"In my humble opinion, she now sees the bigger picture, from a higher perspective."

(Which led to planning a coup...) Harts just barely kept those words to himself. His suspicion, in fact, had some ground to stand on. The Demon Lord's advisors had seamlessly assumed their roles in trying to push their master to lead Holylight. Once that became apparent, the Madam would join their cause without hesitation. In that sense, the Madam was no longer neutral to Harts, but against him.

As Harts and the butler continued to try and figure each other out, Luna was whining to the coachman, irritated. "Come on, already! When are we going to leave!?"

“Ah!” the coachman whelped. “B-But, all those people with things to sell...”

“Then you stay behind and handle them!”

“Miss Luna, please...”

Luna’s elation at this no-limit shopping spree subsided, replaced by her irritation at the caravan’s snail-like pace.

Then, one of Hart’s men brought a piece of news. “Lord Harts, a troupe of the Tzardom are at Suneo, up ahead...”

“And crucifying a demi-human, eh? Distasteful scum.”

Despite being a citizen of Holylight, Harts held no animosity for demi-humans. This was simply because he had no time for such prejudice. His days were filled with defending the nation’s border from invaders, bandits, and even Satanists. He had no time to concern himself with a viewpoint on demi-humans.

(I should tell Lady Luna, just in case...)

When Harts whispered the news into Luna’s ear, she turned to the ground and fell silent. After a few moments, Harts realized that her shoulders were quivering. When Luna lifted her chin, her eyes were glowing bright with determination.

“Follow me, Harts. Madam’s butler, I’ll leave things here to you,” Luna declared. Harts couldn’t help but take a step back at the sudden change in her attitude. The elderly butler knelt and bowed his head. He must have been told of the situation by the Madam before the trip. “We’re going to Suneo,” she ordered the coachman. “Don’t expect to rest until we get there.” The carriage started away, and Harts hurried to pursue them on his horse, his men following behind.

“Lady Luna,” he called out. “What are you going to do with that demi-human...?” Holylight worshiped the Angel and loathed demi-humans. The only thing Harts could imagine Luna planning to do was watch the crucifixion or execute the prisoner herself. “Lady Luna! It would be a political scandal to execute a foreign demi-human!”

“Who said anything about executing?”

“Then why are we headed there? What’s the point in getting involved with something like this?”

The title of Holy Maiden had already garnered notoriety among the Northern Nations. While that was mostly because of Queen, if Luna started with bizarre actions now, their reputation would surely plummet.

“She’s my friend,” Luna confessed, much to the shock of Harts, who had just rambled on. “So I’m going to go help her. Do you have a problem with that?” Luna’s expression was an astonishingly pure and charming smile.

As he sped up on his steed and tore through the air, Harts felt like he was becoming intoxicated. “Friend...? A demi-human...?” As he asked, Harts recalled some old news from back in the day, when Luna had brazenly agreed to be the lady of the village of Rabbi that no one else dared to get involved with. Back then, Harts was secretly moved by the decision. Unfortunately, as he learned that Luna never properly ran her land, she had lost the credit she had earned with Harts. “I-In any case, please wait a moment... It appears that the Tzardom is involved in this mess.”

“So?”

“So... Our nation and the Tzardom have been long-standing allies. If you directly oppose them as a Holy Maiden, Lady Luna, you will cause a diplomatic nightmare!”

Despite Hart’s desperate plea for reconsideration, Luna’s expression didn’t change. In fact, her glare grew ever sharper. “Didn’t you know, Harts?”

“Know... what?” Harts twisted his brows.

“I’m selfish,” Luna declared with finality. “I don’t care one bit about the Tzardom.”

“Please think of your status...! You mustn’t act on impulse!”

“Alright. You can live your life not helping your friends. Like I said, I’m selfish. I’m never going to let anything I love slip through my fingers again.” Luna sped up her carriage even more.

Harts had considered stopping her by force until she said that line: ‘live your

life not helping your friends.’ If he didn’t support Luna now, he couldn’t face his men back at Gatekeeper, with whom he shared the little food and salt they had in their poor, harsh conditions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the military nobles were bonded by the singular trust that no one would be left behind, no matter how daunting the battle. Luna had accused Harts of trying to break that very promise.

“I understand your intentions, Lady Luna, but...” Harts cut himself off as he noticed the black smoke in the sky up ahead.

Luna’s expression shifted. “Go faster, you moron!”

“W-We can’t...!” the coachman whined.

Harts quickly gave an order to his men, knowing that they were headed into a battlefield. “Create a circle around Lady Luna. I’ll lead.” He rode to the front of their formation. Staring down the rising smoke, he surveyed the conflict with his skill, Assess Battlefield. (Most likely a small clash of about a thousand, total. But those screams...) The variety of cries definitely contained untrained citizens, which made Harts imagine large-scale arson or pillaging. Moreover, the eerie sense of darkness tipped off Hart’s intuition that the Satanists were somehow involved in the conflict. (What’s happening up there...!?) Calming his racing mind, Harts’s group raced down the travel road, leaving a dust cloud in their wake.

Soon, he saw the capital of Suneo rise on the horizon, engulfed in flames.

Light vs. Darkness

An accident out of the blue,

Misfortune for both parties ensued,

Still, the spark ignited an expansive fire,

The flames will roar until they exhaust the pyre,

Or someone can extinguish them.

——The capital of Suneo.

Just at the Tzardom troupe was moving to crucify Eagle in the public eye, another group was swarming under the streets of Suneo: the Satanists, tasked with the assassination of Luna. They had gathered in the sewers of the capital for a sinister meeting.

Garcia, leader of this group, glared at his comrades with ferocious eyes, panting like a beast. "Comrades," he called, "what's the sense in quietly passing by this city?"

"What do you mean, Comrade Garcia?"

"Do you feel nothing at all seeing the neat little streets above us?"

"Well..." The group fell silent.

They had seen one of the cleanest streets in the Northern Nations, an extremely elegant castle, and the gentle smiles on the passersby. All in all, the city above them was filled with happiness. The sight was too bright for the Satanists, who lived underground like dirt-crawling bugs.

"The Holy Maiden is another issue, but don't you think we could rain down some devastation upon this land? Besides, our pockets are a tad light... Let us retake our wealth from those drunk on illusions."

Garcia's words gradually changed the look in his comrades' eyes. They now understood what he was driving at. If a more level-headed member like Warlkin was here, he would have calmed the group saying something like 'it would serve us worse to make an enemy out of foreign citizens.' Unfortunately for them, no one acted as the reins in this particular group. While the Satanists caused terrorism in Holylight, they recruited the poor and the destitute from foreign nations. At times, they even groomed foreign citizens to garner funds for their activities. Because of that, turning people in foreign nations against them would only hurt them. Even with that knowledge, Garcia continued to stoke his comrades.

"Retake our wealth! Our coin, our land, our families, all we were robbed of! Our camaraderie! Our love!"

His call would have made no sense to a sane mind, but it was critically effective to the Satanists ruled entirely by grudges, envy, and hatred.

“Comrade Garcia is right... This land needs more devastation.”

“Indeed! Death to false happiness!”

“We need more destruction and sacrifice to fulfill our ambition!”

“Use our stolen wealth to fuel our crusade for the new world!”

The Satanists shouted, holding up their swords and staves. The happiness and abundance in this city had dulled their minds. Garcia tactfully manipulated his comrades to stoke a fire, and all he had to do now was unleash the beasts out onto the surface.

“Now, comrades! Let us celebrate in preparation for striking down the Holy Maiden!”

The Satanists roared and spilled into the streets.

Left alone, Garcia grimaced. His shadow, cast by the faint torchlight, shifted its shape until it resembled an ominous devil.

“Hah ha ha...! Power to Tartarus...! Bring despair to this land...!” Garcia, or perhaps his shadow, cackled.

Soon, his shadow restored its original shape, and Garcia sprung above ground with the nimbleness of a beast.

Meanwhile, on the surface...

The Tzardom troupe was setting up the grand spectacle of the demi-human’s crucifixion. A large crowd had gathered before the castle to get a glimpse of the demi-human, engulfing the plaza in an astonishing ruckus.

“So that’s what a demi-human looks like...”

“It’s all beaten up. Thought it’d be more scary-looking.”

“That’s just a young girl... Those Tzardom thugs are cruel bastards.”

“I wouldn’t let them hear you say that, old man.”

“Heh! It’s getting what it deserves, that filthy demi-human!”

The voices in the crowd varied from those who sympathized to those who

detested, and then there were those who quietly protested. The bishop wasn't hosting this show to garner support of the people, but to let the story of his conquest reach his home country.

"That is an incredible crowd out there, bishop," the commander pointed out with surprise.

The bishop chuckled. "No matter where you go, the people thirst for entertainment." He squinted his eyes in glee. What could have been a better show to act as the finale of their long journey?

"But crucifixion, bishop? It'll be quite the spectacle."

"We might as well get our use out of it."

Suneo was one of the wealthiest Northern Nations. By crucifying a demi-human in the middle of the city, the bishop intended to thoroughly display the strength of the Tzardom to the crowd. He was sure to be welcomed with thunderous applause once he returned to his home country.

"Then all we have to do is hand over the demi-human," the commander said.

"Hm. Once we obtain the remaining goods, we will be running up the ladder." The bishop had dropped the euphemisms like 'growing nearer to the Light.' He must have realized that the commander and he were of the same breed.

"The rank above bishop would be... T-Temple master...!?" The commander looked at the bishop like he was gazing up at an enormous tree.

The temple master, by all means, stood at the top of the Tzardom. While rectors, friars, archbishops, and cardinals were on a separate hierarchy, these positions were filled by those who gave their lives to the Great Light. This made them closer to the people, but farther from power. The temple master, who ruled the temples throughout the Tzardom, on the other hand, had a direct line to the pope.

The bishop considered any position that held no power, no matter how much support it garnered from the people, to be no better than decoration. For someone as steeped in worldly pleasures as him, those positions were completely useless.

“Temple master...” the bishop chuckled again. “It’s been so long...”

There were numerous temples throughout the Tzardom, but there were also a good number of them on foreign soil serving various purposes. While they all welcomed worshipers and donors, some temples provided medical treatment for a certain price. Knights and spies got involved with temples too, providing crucial intel. The temples served two completely different roles on and under the surface. Even their troupe was composed of knights and volunteer soldiers from temples around the country, with a number of 600. This was nothing other than an extravagant show hosted by the Tzardom.

“Commander. I am certain you understand the general framework of things. If you want to continue reaping the sweet fruit of our labor, you only need to follow me. I will see to it that you are appointed grand commander.”

“S-Sincerely, Bishop!? I am beyond honored!”

“Mm. Keep up the good work.”

The commander bowed low, as if to his master. The gesture epitomized the relationship between clergy and military in the Tzardom. The clergymen who devoted themselves to the Great Light and followed its teaching were required to have a high affinity for Light or Holy magic, as well as excel in academics and come from a reputable house. They were most akin to the aristocratic elites.

On the other hand, anyone, no matter how poor or uneducated, could rise through military ranks as long as they could prove themselves in combat. Their positions grew with experience. Of course, experience as a military leader could only be acquired on battlefields, which meant that they needed to experience a horrifying amount of bloodshed to climb their career ladder.

“You people really are rotten to the core...” Eagle opened her eyes slightly and looked at the pair with disgust.

The bishop wore a smile, completely unbothered by the comment. “You’re awake.”

“How dare you speak such insolence to the bishop!?”

“Now, now. Calm yourself.”

“B-But...”

“This is a precious beast, you know. Just one in our captivity would bring us immense wealth and status. Think of that, and anything it says becomes a sweet whisper to your ears.” The bishop laughed, looking to the erected cross with disdain. Eagle stared back through her fading consciousness. “Don’t you have any other beastly friends? If you tell me where they are, I’ll consider putting a good word in for you to your new owners.”

“Go to hell, you rotten cleric.”

“Hah ha ha! How beastly! It’s very becoming!”

After that remark, Eagle closed her eyes, completely spent.

The commander glared at Eagle with annoyance, scoffing. “The beast knows not its place. But it would be beneficial for us to capture more demi-humans, if possible... Would it be too dangerous to enter Animania, bishop?”

“We will have to exterminate every single demi-human at some point... but that path hosts a number of obstacles we still need to overcome.”

“Obstacles?”

The bishop wanted nothing more than to hunt down more and more demi-humans. However, the one who ruled the demi-humans was a serious problem.

“It won’t be in our favor to anger the Dragonborn. Not yet.”

“D-Dragonborn... Does such a thing really exist?”

“A monster described in old legends, but according to rumors, it appeared just the other day in Holylight to defeat a high-rank devil... The notion is far from trustworthy, of course.”

The Tzardom and Holylight had a long-lasting relationship, but the long distance between the two countries and years of espionage left the Tzardom to discredit Holylight as lackluster. Furthermore, the Tzardom looked down on Holylight as a second-class country, and didn’t even entertain the idea that the country could be a possible threat. For the Tzardom, as the country that had always worshiped the Great Light, the Angel-worshipping Holylight had always been the distant relative they butted heads with. In any case, the Tzardom

always considered themselves the ruler of the household, and always on higher ground.

“No need for us to reach for the nuts in the fire. The main squad of Elemental Knights should be on the move soon...”

“I-I see...”

The Tzardom had an order of knights for Fire, Water, Wind, and Earth. Each order was composed of Magi-knights who excelled in each corresponding element of magic. Their sheer size, as well as the threat they posed, made them one of the largest forces in the country.

“It would be even easier if the paladin saw to it.”

“Will he ever? That weirdo would... P-Pardon me, bishop.”

“No need. That man has lost the right way of life in this world.” The bishop’s impression of Weeb was that of a man he couldn’t control. Weeb wanted for nothing. Not status, money, women, or booze... He wanted for nothing in this world or the next. The only thing he chased after was the ridiculous goal of ending poverty and bringing perpetual peace to the continent. The bishop could only imagine that the man was mentally unstable. Such things were impossible, by any means. “That one will take some coaxing to... Hm? What’s that noise?”

“Perhaps a drunken brawl...?”

The bishop’s ears twitched at the distant screams. Soon, the screams grew louder, making it clear that this was no brawl.

“That’s...!” The bishop rushed to his feet as an eerie shiver ran through his spine.

“Bishop! It appears that Satanists have attacked near the entrance to the city!”

“Satanists!?” The bishop was utterly confused by that. While the Satanists were active throughout the continent, and were subject to execution in the Tzardom, their activities had always remained recruiting the poor and garnering sympathy for their cause. As far as the bishop knew, they were not an organization to wage such an attack in broad daylight.

“What should we do, bishop!?”

“Send out the Temple Knights,” the bishop dismissed. “Control the scene.” He twisted his face in annoyance that his show was going to be interrupted.

Meanwhile, the Satanists were attacking the entire area without discrimination. Some stole everything valuable that wasn't nailed down, some broke into houses, some thrust their blades at anyone they came across, and others even set aflame anything flammable they passed. The peaceful capital had delved into indescribable chaos in the blink of an eye.

“Help me! Please!”

“What are you!? No, I beg of you, don't take those coins!”

“M-My baby...! Someone, help!”

“What are the guards doing!?”

Amidst the tears, screams, violence, and the dead and their families, the Satanists laughed with maniacal zealotry. They were filled with hatred, envy, and madness. They bore visible abhorrence towards those that enjoyed the peace they had long lost. Devils had a knack for seeping into those cracks in one's heart.

“Take back our wealth!”

“Paradise can only be built on a foundation of corpses!”

“Death be to false peace! Bring devastation to this land!”

The Satanists shouted through the streets, striking down anyone in their paths. The ones who ruined their lives were the nobles of Holylight, so the people of this city were completely blameless in that. However, there was not enough sanity left in these people after giving themselves up to the devils.

As utter chaos ensued, the Temple Knights finally arrived.

“What is this mess...?”

“How barbaric.”

The knights watched the commotion with clear disdain. The uniformed knights grew in number, each of them drawing their sword upon arrival.

“Satanists, of all things... What a waste of time.”

“What are those devil-worshippers thinking?”

“We better get a bonus for this.”

While the knights stationed in temples within the Tzardom were proud and courageous, the same could not be said about this lot, stationed at the local temple in Suneo. They had been knocked off of the career ladder, in a sense. Naturally, their morale was lower than ideal. The only perk of being stationed in a foreign temple was that they wouldn't be dragged out to war. They felt a sick sense of irony in fighting Satanists on foreign grounds.

“Where are the soldiers of this country, anyway?”

“Hmph, don't you know? The king of this land prides himself on cowardice.”

“He must be gathering all the men to his castle by now.”

“Whatever. Let's get this over with.”

The Temple Knights easily cut down one Satanist after another, the fanatics already having lost themselves in destruction. While some fought back, the knights were able to slice through them without receiving a single blow, as if they were dicing vegetables on the chopping block. Limbs and heads flew through the air.

“Damned devil worshippers... You are the scum of the continent!”

“Kneel before God!”

The Satanists were shaken at the unexpected appearance of such a powerful force. The Satanists, by their own right, were no seasoned warriors. They were simply untrained civilians waving around weapons, no match for veteran fighters. No matter how dangerous a terrorist was, they couldn't do much in a one-on-one against a Navy SEAL.

The crowd gradually stopped running away and called to the knights with excitement.

“Th-The Tzardom has saved us!”

“Noble knights! Please heal my baby!”

“Noble knights, my house is burning down over there! Please help me!”

“L-Let go...! Move out of our way!”

Seeing the crowd throw themselves at the knights, the Satanists made their move. Even though they stood no chance in a fair contest of strength, they specialized in guerrilla warfare, loosing arrows or throwing spears at the knights.

“Argh!”

“L-Let go of me, you— Grah!”

The immobilized knights fell to the ground, one after another. After seeing the attack change the course of battle from afar, Garcia rose with a sinister grin on his face.

“Good. Unleash the Entranced!”

“C-Comrade Garcia... Are you sure?”

“Of what?”

“Waging war against the Tzardom is going too far...!”

“They’re next on our list after Holylight, anyway. Tear them to shreds!”

Garcia summoned an eerie group of people with their hands tied behind their backs. They looked pale and sickly, with no gleam in their eyes. They were the end product of those who fell addicted to dangerous drugs. Their steps were faulty, and they had completely lost their minds. Still, their necks spun round and round as they kept sensing the object in their pocket.

Garcia cackled. “Cut their binds! Release them!”

As soon the ropes that bound their hands were cut, the Entranced reached into their pockets and produced a red crab claw, dusted with the drug. These were a sinister magical item called The Final Straw. The entranced bit down on the claws without hesitation and swallowed the pieces. Just as they cried out in ecstasy, crab claws exploded from their heads and guts, blowing them to pieces.

Garcia spread his arms, and cursed up to the clear sky. “Let devastation wash

over all... Summon Darkness!”

Monsters such as Hellhounds, Skeleton Warriors, Zombies, and Haunts appeared in the pool of blood and guts, summoned by the sacrifice. While small in number, the horde of monsters included dangerous ones like Dark Mummies, wrapped in black bandages, and Bloodied Wolves.

“M-Monsters!”

“Run!”

“Get off of me! I can barely move through the lot of y— N-No, noooo!”

Zombies piled onto one of the knights. Half of his neck was taken away with a single bite, from which blood spewed out like a fountain. When the fallen knight rose again as yet another zombie, the remaining knights looked like they had snapped out of a nightmare, and gave each other a look. They turned to killing the people who surrounded them.

“Out of the way, you heretics!”

“Can’t let them bite us... Strike down every single one!”

“Keep the Undead away!”

“Notify the others! This is a class-2 Evil Hazard!”

Massacring the desperate citizens, the Temple Knights gained some space. When facing down Undead monsters, more weaklings on the field translated to more potential enemies.

“To think they would summon the Undead... Those zealots!” One of the knights cursed as he struck down a confused old man.

While the knights cutting down innocent civilians with mere annoyance might have given off the impression that they were zealots themselves, they had finally secured enough space to regroup and face the horde of the Undead.

Meanwhile, the bishop had just received the report. “A class-2... Evil Hazard!? What is happening!?”

Evil Hazard was a classification in three stages used by the Tzardom. Class-3 signified Hellions approaching a city, where they would initiate a state of

emergency. Class-2 was when the Hellions had already infiltrated the city, and massive casualties were expected. With any delay in their reaction, a majority of the city's residents would be killed. Class-1 indicated the location had already turned into a City of Death, where the knights were forced to raze the town and any of its surrounding areas.

(I can't let my record be tarnished... Not now!)

No matter how many gifts he prepared, any prospects for the bishop's career would vanish if he were to earn the reputation of creating a City of Death. He immediately called for the best knights available, the top ten of each Elemental Knights' Order.

They arrived in no time and knelt before the bishop, flourishing their capes of vibrant colors that represented their elements. Their aura alone distinguished them from the Temple Knights. Their polished full armor reflected the sunlight enough to convince anyone who saw that they were there to bring light to the world.

"As you can see, the Undead have infiltrated the city. I need your help."

"As you wish," the knights responded.

Ordinarily, the only ones who could order the Elemental Knights were their leaders and the Pope. However, the knights seemed to recognize the emergency at hand. Once the order was issued, the knights were quick to spring into action. They descended upon the battlefield like loosened arrows.

"The enemy is Undead! Eliminate them with the Elementals!"

Forty knights in all raised their swords, darting through the city like shooting stars. Soon, each of them glowed with colors that represented their respective elements, causing an incredible whirl of magic in the air. The Elemental Knights had never been defeated after using this move.

"Summon Elemental — Salamander!"

"Summon Elemental — Undine!"

"Summon Elemental — Sylph!"

"Summon Elemental — Gnome!"

Forty Elementals appeared in all, clashing with the horde of the Undead. The Elementals turned the tide of what had appeared to be a losing battle. The Temple Knights regained their strength at the overwhelming power and blinding appearance of the Elementals.

“Yeah!”

“That’s our Elemental Knights!”

“Glory be... Glory be to the Great Light!”

As light and darkness clashed on the battlefield, Garcia produced a trump card from his pocket in order to turn the tides once again.

“Hah! Didn’t expect to get this far so soon...”

“W-Wait, Comrade Garcia! What about the Holy Maiden!?”

“I don’t give a damn about that...”

“What do you mean!? Don’t!”

Garcia produced an old box from his pockets and proudly held it up. The box, for some reason, was tightly chained up with two locks.

“You gotta be hungry, huh? You’ll eat some Elementals, won’t you? Gah ha ha!”

Garcia produced a blue key and a red key, sticking them into their respective locks. In an instant, blinding light emanated from the locks, unchaining the box. A black liquid crawled from the box, eventually creating a giant vortex on the ground. Two eyes glowed in the vortex, and moved as if they were searching for something. The vortex howled in agony, an ear-splitting scream that sounded so ominous and endlessly enraged that even the Satanists around Garcia fell to the ground. They instinctively knew that they were beholding a true devil. The vortex twisted and formed itself into a devil-shaped shadow, writhing in pain. Finally, the eyes seemed to find what they were looking for. The devil charged towards the battlefield with incredible speed.

The Elemental Knights were astonished.

“Wh-What is that?”

“A devil! It’s a devil!”

“But... I’ve never seen a devil like that...”

Most of the devils that inhabited this continent had their appearance and characteristics detailed in historical documents. Generations of humans had risked their lives to accumulate knowledge on them. The Tzardom in particular, which had a long history of waging war against the devils, was rich with such documents. Even so, none of the Elemental Knights recognized the devil before them.

The knights rushed to send the Elementals against the shadow, but it grabbed them by the handful and threw them into its mouth. The beautiful Elementals being sloppily chewed and swallowed by the shadow hushed the battlefield. The shadow, apparently hungry, grabbed one after another. The shadow didn’t even seem bothered by the smoke that rose from its hands as it grabbed the Elementals, which seemed to signify its opposition with the forces of holiness. Seemingly fighting emaciation, the shadow continued to eat, even devouring the swarming Zombies and Haunts without discrimination, thickening its form along the way. The sight of Salamanders and Gnomes being trampled and the beautiful Undines and Sylphs being devoured inspired feelings of the end of the world.

After finishing all forty Elementals and the remaining Undead, the devil finally materialized. Its black, hardened body was reminiscent of a seasoned warrior, or a wild beast. Its face was covered with a golden mask, and it seemed to still be in agony somehow.



“Th-This is too far!”

“We can’t deal with this monster... Not on our own!”

“Retreat! Retreat!”

The trusty Elemental Knights stumbled back, and the Temple Knights fled in all directions. The only ones left aside from them were the people immobilized by fear.

“C-Comrade Garcia... What is that thing!?”

“Behemoth, a devil of a bygone era... An Ancient Devil, if you will.” Garcia cackled, making even the Satanist who had asked the question stiffen in fear. He seemed to doubt that Garcia wasn’t some sort of monster. “Must have been starving, being locked up for so long... It’s gone and eaten some Elementals and lost its mind! Looks like Ancient Devils aren’t shit, after all!” Garcia continued to slap his knee and bellow, gazing over the chaotic battlefield. Lacking any sense of logic, the devil was tossing Temple Knights and citizens into its gullet, the horrid sound of chewing bones echoing through the city. After ingesting Elementals, humans, and even the Undead, an agonized growl droned from its gaping mouth. “Now, let’s sit back and enjoy the show...” Garcia vanished.

The members of the Tzardom, on the other hand, were completely shaken. Not only was the city attacked by the Undead, but also by an unexplainable devil, one that devoured even Elementals.

“B-Bishop! Shouldn’t we retreat!?”

“Have you lost your mind! Can you imagine the punishment I’d face when we returned if I retreated now...!?” The bishop imagined the turn of events if he would flee the scene, and it was bleak. In fact, the bishop had numerous opponents back in the Tzardom who would gladly sabotage him. After cleverly schmoozing higher-ups and rapidly climbing up the career ladder, the bishop had become the target of much envy and hatred. If he were to be accused of creating a City of Death, in a foreign nation no less, his downfall would be inevitable. “There’s no other way... I must use *this*, the thing I’d acquired for an emergency like this.”

“I-Is that an Egg of the World!?”

“At this point, all we can do is trust our destiny... Tell anyone who can move to gather here!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

As the commander ran off, Eagle slightly opened her eyes to see the knights of the Tzardom running around like chickens with their heads cut off, the scrambling crowd around them not doing much better. The city was stained with crimson in various places, and rattled with the screams of people. She had seen this sight before, somewhere. In fact, the sight was all too familiar.

“It’s my fault...”

“What was that?” The bishop gave an annoyed look to Eagle’s faint whisper. He couldn’t afford to deal with a mere demi-human anymore.

“This happens everywhere I go. I must be cursed...”

“Hmph. Sounds like you’ve finally learned your place, you filthy demi-human,” the bishop remarked, before the scoff disappeared from his face. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps the demi-human before him was actually a harbinger of misfortunes. Come to think of it, he had just gone through a terrible crisis in Hellion territory. He might have been able to brush off the comment if it wasn’t for the situation he was in right now. *Should I kill this demi-human, right here and now...? No, some curses can linger.* Curses had taken many forms throughout history, many of which were contagious. Some curses were directly carried onto the one who killed its host. With that in mind, the bishop couldn’t kill Eagle too hastily. *Best to saddle this pest with the devil...*

Just as the bishop’s scheming came full circle, the surviving knights were beginning to gather around him. Each of their expressions were shaded with exhaustion, their once-glimmering armor smeared with blood and mud.

“You all understand the situation we’re in,” the bishop said. “If we flee now, we can only imagine what prosecution awaits us in our homeland for creating a City of Death.”

All knights agreed, powerlessly. Those of common birth could even be executed as black sheep. “Therefore, I have decided to use *this*. Lend me your strength, everyone.” Even the Elemental Knights couldn’t help but be audibly

awestruck. This was a bona fide Legendary item, a national treasure of the Tzardom. It was like a ray of hope had been cast onto this supremely hopeless situation. “I haven’t any time to explain... Manifestation Formation!” At the bishop’s call, the knights sprung into action. They formed a circle with the bishop at the center of them and stuck their swords into the ground. They all poured as much magic as they could into their blades, ready to spend every last drop of Stamina they had left. “Not too bad... Give it every bit of faith you’ve got!”

The knights roared in response. Egg of the World was a one-and-done gamble of incredible magnitude. From an angel-winged egg, one could summon some holy deity. It was completely random as to which being it would summon, though. After countless generations of countless errors, humans had still not found a way to guarantee a powerful summon. This was an odd-ball Legendary item that was only used in the most desperate of situations.

Goddess Moira... Lend me your strength! Bestow upon me the power to spin my own destiny! The bishop prayed alone with all of his heart to the Goddess of Destiny, rather than the Great Light. Perhaps someone did hear his prayer. “Hua-hoo! This is a good one... Feels like a hit!” the bishop cried out, as small fractures spread through the egg. From within it, blinding, holy light burst through the cracks. “Great ring of incarnation,” the bishop called, his arms outstretched to the heavens. “Show us mortals a perfect world... Summon Angel!”

The egg split in half and something appeared above, floating in mid-air.

“Th-That’s...!”

“Incredible! I can’t believe such a being would appear before us!”

A giant plated with an otherworldly metal had appeared. Despite its inorganic appearance, green light emanated from cracks spread across its metal plating to signify its genuine divinity. Everyone from the Tzardom thrust their fists into the air in celebration.

The bishop was no exception. “Ahua-hoo! A Guardian Angel! I’ve got it! I’ve got it, all right!” He had cast the dice of destiny and rolled an angel. Having survived numerous close calls before, he was now assured that he would make

it out of this predicament, too. “Moira, Goddess of Destiny! I am forever humbled by your blessing!” he shouted, completely moved by the appearance of the Guardian Angel.

A few of the knights let out a frown at the remark, but their relief won out. Everyone bowed their heads to the Guardian Angel, now slowly floating down to the ground. Its neck spun completely around, making a mechanical noise, as if it was observing its surroundings. Then, its large, ancient-statue-like eyes gleamed with a powerful light.

“Undead confirmed. Initiating attack.” Even the Guardian’s tone was mechanical, but the members of the Tzardom seemed reassured. But then, it continued: “Class-1 Target, Behemoth, confirmed. Evacuate the vicinity immediately.”

After being taken aback at this for a moment, the bishop hurriedly shouted, “everyone, down on the ground! Hold onto something!”

Some of the knights looked confused by the bishop’s dire tone. They had just summoned an Angel, after all. What was there to worry about? That was the last thought of those knights before a powerful gale of wind and several rays of light were released from the Guardian Angel, blowing those knights away. Then, those rays of light concentrated on the Guardian’s right hand, causing it to glow. A moment later, there was devastation. It fired a beam and swept it over the city with a perfectly horizontal motion, leveling the entire capital in an instant. The catastrophically beautiful beam and the strengthening winds destroyed buildings, the Undead, the knights, and the citizenry. All purged in a single moment. While most survivors struggled to even open their eyes, Eagle alone was watching the ruin before her.

(It’s all my fault again...) She knew that her existence had caused the tragedy before her. If she was never here, no one would have died. Amidst the roaring flurry of flames, dust, and carnage, the Ancient Devil slowly arose. Eagle gazed up to the heavens with hot tears streaking down her face. This hell had only just been unleashed. As if to confirm her fear, the Guardian Angel opened its mouth with a mechanical rattling and fired a green beam at the devil. The bishop shouted something, but it was drowned by the noise. It might have begged for the Guardian to stop, or maybe cheered it on.

The instant before the beam would hit the devil, it leapt high above the ground. A move reminiscent of a predator animal, contrasting its bloated silhouette. The members of the Tzardom watched in shock at the unexpected movement.

The devil wretched and regurgitated a horrifying black sphere towards them, and watching this, the bishop shouted “A-A-Angel! Hurry and protect me!”

“Ball of a Thousand Deaths, from Behemoth, confirmed. Massive damage to armor, expected.”

“Wh-What are you babbling on about!? Just defend me!”

The Guardian Angel charged forward, catching the fired ball with its entire body. An ear-splitting metallic crash echoed through the landscape. Although the black sphere had disappeared, the Guardian’s chest was now terribly dented.

“Transition, to, heal mode. Schedule, transition, to annihilation mode, after — beep beep— restarting.”

The relief of the Tzardom knights was short-lived, as they now scrambled to fight back a wave of low-rank devils that came rushing in. Eagle was the only one there who had heard the Guardian Angel’s last remark.

(This thing isn’t an angel...) While Eagle had no knowledge of what angels were supposed to be, she was sure of it. In fact, she figured it was a golem built to fight off Hellions.

Meanwhile, Harts was also in shock to find the capital totally devastated. Suneo had always maintained a popular-kid-in-class style of diplomacy, making them one of the few Northern Nations to avoid being roped into war. While its king was often called a coward, he was indisputably effective. Now this city built by years of diplomatic peace was in shambles.

(This was just supposed to be a little clash between the Tzardom and the Satanists... What’s going on...?) Harts continued to observe the area without letting his emotions get the best of him. Then he noticed the devil, more sinister than anything he had ever seen, facing down a mock-angel. It was as if a battle from an ancient myth had come to life. (The mock-angel’s one thing, but

that devil is dangerous. Much too dangerous...!) It was worth noting that Holylight had never called the ilk of this mechanical thing before Harts an angel, despite what the Tzardom claimed when they summoned them from time to time. Holylight had always seen it as some emotionless and fearsome being, rather than anything holy. In fact, the capital of Suneo had just been blown up by it, with all of its people still in it. Harts would sooner believe that the thing held no interest in humans at all, than to believe that it was a being trying to protect them.

(All I can do is tell Lady Luna about this... Better yet, I'll have her see it for herself.) He suspected that no amount of explaining would do this catastrophe justice. Besides, Luna wouldn't back down from Hart's report alone. Giving the now-warzone another look-over, Harts tried to predict Luna's reaction. (Her friend must be the one crucified over there...) By coincidence or otherwise, the cross was directly behind the Guardian, across from the devil, making it look like the thing was protecting Eagle. While Harts saw no immediate danger heading her way, he reminded himself not to be optimistic. As long as that devil was here, the complete destruction of the capital was imminent. (Actually, that mock-angel might finish the city, first...) Harts shuddered to imagine it. How could Holylight ever build an amicable relationship with a Tzardom that worshiped such horrid beings as these?

As Harts was contemplating his next move, Hanzo infiltrated the city upon hearing of the commotion, and felt stuck in an awkward spot. Just as she was planning to pit the Tzardom against Holylight, the Satanists came crashing in. Worst-case scenario, the two nations may even fight together against their radical common enemy.

(This wasn't part of the advisor's plan.) The unfamiliar devil writhed in pain, spawning hordes of low-rank devils. The once-peaceful capital was quickly becoming a hellscape, countless vile creatures running amok. Not even Kongming could have foreseen this predicament as a possible outcome. (What conclusion do we need this battle to reach...?) The mock-angel seemed to have used up its power and was recharging at the moment. If it and the devil were to exchange blasts again, the capital would surely crumble. The problem for Hanzo was that no matter who won, the result would be extremely problematic. (The

devil surviving is out of the question. It could destroy all the neighboring nations, along with this one.) That being said, Hanzo wasn't sure if the results would be any better if the mock-angel survived the fight. It didn't seem at all that the Tzardom had any control over it. She had heard a legend of the same creature appearing on a battleground out west, where it brought devastation everywhere it went until its life burned out.

(The third sister's notorious for being selfish and stubborn... Would she still try and save that demi-human after seeing what's happened here?) No sane person of Luna's status would try and intervene with such a colossal mess going on. Hanzo, with coolness becoming of a ninja, searched for new objectives that she should complete. At the very least, she intended to take something away from this mess. (I'll rob the castle town of valuables, and the castle of classified documents and treasure.) She whistled some command to her subordinates and disappeared into the burning city.

At the same time, Luna had just arrived on the cusp of the city. She was wordlessly watching the capital stained with flames. Harts was explaining the situation the city had found itself in, but it was difficult to tell if Luna heard any of it. At the moment, Luna was remembering the Holy City from some time ago. The Satanists had attacked the city from below ground, nearly destroying it all. This time, however, a powerful devil was clashing with a mock-angel, both dangerous. Things seemed even more precarious than they did in Holylight.

(Eagle...) She silently called, as she watched the back of the giant devil flicker like a mirage in the middle of the burning capital. Beyond the devil, she could see the dimly illuminating mock-angel. Eagle's crucifix was further beyond that, hopelessly out of Luna's reach.

"Are you listening, Lady Luna!? At this rate—" Even Hart's voice seemed somehow distant to her. Even as he spoke, the giant devil kept spawning low-rank devils like a broken piece of factory machinery, increasing their numbers by the second. It seemed like a situation no human could handle. "I understand how you feel, Lady Luna, but we should retreat for the time being!"

"No."

"Do you expect your stubbornness to keep you alive even through *this*!?"

“She’s waiting for me. I can’t run away again.” Luna lifted her chin with resolve, but her holy staff quivered in her hand. No matter how hard she tried to control it, her shaking didn’t stop. (Demon Lord...) She couldn’t help but long for him. The lackadaisical loose-cannon that always brushed her off with a condescending attitude. His face, in her mind, shifted from a sarcastic grin to a hearty smile, and then to a frighteningly alluring look.

(Oh, I get it now... This is love.)

Despite the situation at hand, that was the thought that rose to Luna’s mind. Now that she recognized it, the emotion seemed to fit so well in her chest. Before she knew it, her hand had stopped shaking.

“Listen to me, Lady Luna! Look at this—”

The screams throughout the city were only growing louder. The giant devil, along with countless low-rank devils, swarmed before her. It seemed hopeless for Luna to reach her friend crucified behind the mock-angel beyond the devils. However, the only thing bubbling within Luna was her fighting spirit. She felt certain, and in fact, she had found her answer. (The days I’ve spent... All the work I’ve put in... It was all for today. All for this moment.)

Luna saw her days flash by, from the starving times in the orphanage, the separation from her friend, and working away with her blood, sweat, and tears despite being looked down upon for coming out of an orphanage, to reaching the status of Holy Maiden. (Every trial and tribulation is only there for me to beat it...!) With fiery determination, Luna stared hard at the devil before her. It was acting senselessly, spewing out balls of fire, holding its head in pain, and trampling all over the low-rank devils it had summoned.

“I’m going to get rid of that devil first. Harts, help evacuate the residents.”

“Lady Luna—” Harts reached to stop her, but cut himself off, seeing a golden aura envelop her. He couldn’t help but take a step back at her dignified glow, becoming of a Holy Maiden. Harts, who had spent most of his life on the battlefield, could sense what kind of change Luna had undergone. People rapidly changed in the midst of war. Harts had seen plenty of new recruits go from crying and screaming to bona fide soldiers, and just as many brave warriors become too scared to move. He figured that Luna was at a turning

point in her personal growth arc.

He couldn't have asked for more than for his Holy Maiden to grow and molt into a new version of herself. (If she can grow up now, she may reconsider her attempt at a coup...) Watching Luna dive into the turmoil with determination, Harts hardened his resolve. The devil before them could reach Holylight before they knew it. "Everyone, dismount!" He called to his men. "Get those people as far from that devil as possible! It may even use any corpses to its advantage! Strike down any Satanists you find!"

Harts's cavaliers whistled at their horses to make them flee from the city and headed inside. The streets were filled with people scrambling to escape, so they would have barely been able to move on horseback. The sight of waves of low-rank devils massacring through the streets looked like a scene out of a slasher film. (If only I had a thousand men... Huh!?) Harts wished, but then was taken aback by Luna's incredible magic. In an instant, the blinding, golden light illuminated the low-rank devils.

"Out of my way, now! Gold Lightning!" A golden bolt shot out of the Holy Staff of Ramd, reducing the low-rank devils to ash before they could even scream. This spell was a compound of Luna's own creation, Gold magic, and one of the rarest elements of magic that had less than a dozen users in the entire continent, Thunder. Low-rank devils stood no chance against any spell like this. Fifty or so disintegrated in the blink of an eye. Harts stared in amazement, but he had hardly seen the height of Luna's genius.

—Chain Incantation

"Go drown, the lot of you... Storm of Gold!"

Golden rain came pouring down on the giant devil and its surroundings in the middle of the city. It screamed in pain, and the remaining low-rank devils that were swarming around it disappeared with a shriek as the rain touched them.

—Chain Incantation

Harts couldn't believe that Luna had chained into yet another spell. He had known that Luna was gifted in magic, but she far exceeded the scope of any imaginable talent. Luna was approaching the realm of a devil-slaying hero. A few low-rank devils had rushed them in between spells, but Harts cut them all

down.

A Dark Mummy, which cursed anyone who touched them, came rushing, but Harts only gave it a quick glance before lowering his center of gravity and unleashing a fierce attack. “Tornado Kick!” The kick created a powerful shockwave that tore through the paved road and split the Dark Mummy in half. It was the perfect balance of a short and long-range move set. “I haven’t grown *that* old, yet.” Harts kept his guard up in all directions.

Luna’s incantation was nearing its end, as five balls of light created a large, golden, star-shaped magic circle in the air. This would be the attack to end all devils. A class-5 spell, believed by most to be an impossible feat for a human. Trails of sweat ran from Luna’s forehead, her shoulders rising and falling. Her Stamina was nearly spent after casting one grand spell after another, but the resolve in her eyes was unwavering. “Devils are no match for my hard work...” She poured everything she had into the magic circle, and soon it was finished. The blinding magic circle drew all eyes and intoxicated those who beheld it, the epitome of solemnity. It then emanated an incredible force.

—Ray of Golden Dust

In an instant, a beam of golden light pierced through the Ancient Devil, and shook the entire capital like a massive missile had been launched. The clamoring around them ceased, the remaining magic left from Luna’s spell enveloping her. Through the cloud of dust that filled the city, Luna saw the devil staring at her with vile malice. While it seemed to have taken considerable damage, its body still stood. It began spewing Barbarians from its mouth, each of those monsters powerful enough to take on an A-rank adventurer.

“Impossible...” Harts muttered in shock.

Luna, having spent all of her Stamina, was met with a violent spell of dizziness and faltered to the ground. No matter if they were a swordsman or spellcaster, anyone who completely expended their Stamina was met with dizziness and nausea, then lost senses in their limbs, immobilizing them. In worse cases, they lost their hearing, sight, and even possibly their lives.

Harts rushed to find a vial of Ether on his person, which could restore the user’s Stamina, and gave it to Luna. It didn’t help much in the moment, since

Stamina took some time to regenerate once completely spent.

As the bishop watched the Barbarians spread in all directions, color began to drain from his face for two reasons. First, a Holy Maiden of a country he had disregarded as second-class had just cast such an overwhelmingly powerful spell, and second, the devil was still up and ravaging the city after withstanding that spell. At this rate, it seemed inevitable that the capital would become a City of Death.

“A-Angel! Attack that thing, already! Why won’t you move!?”

“49%, restored. Emergency status, activated. Scheduled reactivation at, 60%.”

“What are you going on about!? Now is the time to show the true power of the Light!”

“Behemoth still active, confirmed. Barbarians, confirmed.”

With his final hope immobilized, the bishop could do nothing but scratch his head. Check and mate.

Harts, with chagrin, decided to retreat. “I’m sorry to say this, Lady Luna—”

“I’m... not done. I haven’t given up.” Luna faltered to her feet, undaunted by the situation that had grown beyond anyone’s control.

Harts pulled her back by the hand as Luna tried to walk towards the center of the city. “You have fought well. There’s nothing more we can do.” Hart’s claim was weighted with his experience as a warrior. This was also the first time he had truly seen the girl before him as a Holy Maiden of his country. “I respect how you feel about your friend, but as a servant of our nation, I need to prioritize your safety above that of the demi-human.”

“Look... at me...” Luna muttered. With her Stamina this low, she might have been delirious. “Look at me... Eagle...”

Harts had no words left to say to Luna, who still walked in the direction of her friend, one faltering step at a time. He couldn’t help but avert his gaze. He was moved by Luna, precisely because he had accepted death numerous times on the battlefield to save a friend of his own. (I have misjudged this girl...) Harts quietly wished he could have recanted his opinions of Luna. As much as he

hated to admit it, he was reminded of the Madam. Luna, in fact, was a worthy girl to symbolize. Harts understood how the empress of Holylight could dream up a coup, now knowing Luna's potential.

"...at me, Eagle..." Luna's steps barely progressed, and they were still surrounded by fleeing citizens and their cries, now further spurred by the Barbarians, who ran through the crowd in search of victims with more vitality. No one was looking at Luna, let alone Eagle so far away. "...at me... Look at meeee!" Luna shouted with the last bit of strength within her. Whether she wanted her friend to know that she had come to save her, or that she had kept her promise and became a Holy Maiden, Luna's shout from the soul snapped Eagle out of her delirious state.

Beyond the hellscape, Eagle found a familiar ray of light. "Lu...na..." The light that had once been by her side now shone with a golden hue. Eagle's never-setting sun shimmered in her eyes. "You... came..." Tears poured from her eyes, blurring the light in the distance. *Don't come*, she wanted to shout back. *You did enough*. If she let Luna come any nearer, Eagle thought, even the Holy Maiden's golden light would be tainted by her bloody curse. In spite of those thoughts, Eagle shouted back, "L-Lunaaaa!"

Through the apocalyptic scene covered in flames and screams of terror, Eagle's voice had unmistakably reached Luna. A grin appeared on Luna's face, followed by her signature, fearless expression. "You've always been such a slowpoke... You finally noticed me."

The giant devil now roared in anger towards Luna. Before this day, her feet would have trembled from terror, stopping her in her tracks. But Luna's stride faltered no longer. Just as she spent the last of her strength to take one more step, light began to emanate from the holy staff in her hand, as if the staff itself was blessing Luna for that one step. "What... is this...?" Guided by the light pouring from the staff, chains with a lock materialized and gently wrapped themselves around Luna — the set of holy chains that had once sealed Behemoth. They sank into Luna's body, wrapping themselves around her heart. Then, a blue key and red key were inserted into the lock... Then, *click*.

"No... way...!" Luna's Stamina fully regenerated in an instant, filling her with unbelievable power, explosively amplifying her already powerful abilities. The

golden light emanating from her body began forming a silhouette, that of the solemn Wise Angel as drawn in a mural within the Holy Castle. Luna began reciting a verse before she knew it. *“Deus qui non patietur vos temptari super id quod potestis sed faciet cum temptatione etiam proventum ut possitis sustinere...”* Golden light blew like a typhoon, and Luna mechanically raised her staff at the enraged Behemoth.

—Golden Satellite

Luna swung her holy staff down, and countless golden rays came falling from different points in the heavens, locked on the giant devil. Finally, a bolt of light fell straight onto the devil, tearing up the earth below it. Behemoth released an ear-splitting screech, its mask shattering into pieces. This was a class-7 spell, rumored to have been lost to the sands of time. Even Greole, the late King of Devils, could not wield a class-7 spell. Sizzling, with smoke rising from every part of its body, Behemoth finally fell to its knees. Everyone in the vicinity was watching the scene in awe.

The devil’s eyes that had been hidden beneath the mask were surprisingly pure. “Wise Angel... You’ve stopped me twice now...” The devil spoke intelligibly, able to muster more than groans and cries. Behemoth gazed up to the sky, and then to the girl who had cast the spell. Behemoth seemed to be committing to memory the feeble human who managed to finally defeat him. “Well done, human...” Luna didn’t know how to respond to what sounded like praise coming from the devil. Its eyes shone with a strange light, as if it had just come home from a long, long journey. “My long-lasting suffering has finally come to an end...”

“H-Hey—” Luna called out.

“I am Behemoth. Powerful one, may you be crowned victor of this Game.”

“W-Wait a minute! What does that—” Before Luna could finish, Behemoth crumbled into dust, and dissipated into the air. Luna felt something in her hand, and looked down to find a single black coin resting in her palm. “What’s this...?” As she muttered so, Luna lost all strength from her body, her vision rattled. Perhaps from firing a spell too powerful for her body, pain akin to her body coming apart assaulted Luna from head to toe. She groaned in agony.

“Lady Luna!” Harts, who had been watching the entire scene unfold with astonishment, rushed over. It was as if he had witnessed a piece of myth, and he hadn’t dared to speak a word. In reality, what must have been the Wise Angel had materialized as if to bless Luna. “Let me take your arm.”

“No, thanks... Can’t... let her see me like that...”

Harts obliged with a chuckle, and they headed towards the crucifix with Harts guarding Luna. Her stubbornness, the best bravado a teenage girl could muster, would have annoyed Harts a day ago, but now didn’t seem that bad to Harts anymore.

Meanwhile, the Tzardom troop was not feeling as victorious. They had been excited to see the devil vanquished, but were beginning to fear the fact that the girl who defeated the devil was now walking towards them.

After much calculation, the bishop spoke his conclusion. “She’s grown quite a bit... But that’s definitely the youngest of the Holy Maidens.”

“B-Bishop... What should we do?”

“She’s dangerous.”

“Bishop?”

Someone who could take down a devil of such strength will be nothing but a potential threat to the Tzardom. The bishop had never paid attention to the Holy Maidens of such a second-class country, but now he saw them as a clear enemy. (I must rid the world of her, right here and now. She shall carry the blame for this mess, as well.) With that scheme drawn up, the bishop looked at the immobile Guardian Angel. Once it began moving again, he planned to kill the people from Holylight approaching them, blaming it on the Guardian malfunctioning. He would take out two birds with one stone if he could blame Holylight for the entire ordeal, while he was at it. (Dead men tell no tales... They could not have appeared at a more opportune time.)

Seemingly oblivious to the bishop’s sinister intent, Luna finally arrived at the plaza before the castle. While she and Eagle had grown much separately over the years, they could tell much about each other from just one look. They could have spent ten or twenty more years apart and still done the same. A true

friendship reunited. “I finally made it... I don’t care what happens now.”

“Luna... You really did it...”

“No duh. You look as stupid as ever.”

One of them could barely stand, while the other was crucified. Despite the bizarre circumstances of their reunion, they both had a familiar smile on their faces.

“My, my. How impressive that you’ve taken out that devil...” The bishop slow-clapped as if to purposefully ruin their reunion. Luna didn’t even acknowledge the bishop or his empty remark, and kept walking towards Eagle. “But we have quite an issue on our hands. Even to defeat a devil, you’ve caused catastrophic damage to a foreign capital... I’m sure Lady White would not be happy to hear of this.”

While Luna ignored everything that came out of the bishop’s mouth, Harts quickly caught on to his intent of saddling them with all of the responsibility for this incident. “Your men and the Satanists have brought about all of this damage,” he countered. “Don’t waste your breath.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. It seems a second-class nation like yours doesn’t even educate their men on etiquette,” the bishop said, and one of the Temple Knights pointed his blade at Harts, having understood the bishop’s intent. All they had to do was kill the two before them as scapegoats. They certainly couldn’t afford to take responsibility for such damage. The other knights caught on to the plan, and hurriedly drew their blades.

“Don’t make it hard on yourselves!” one of the Temple Knights yelled. “Your inferior nation has already—” His head went flying.

With one swing of his sword, Harts released a fountain of blood from the knight’s body, which fell over like a log.

The bishop watched, dumbfounded, before understanding his situation and beginning to screech. “D-D-Do you understand what you’ve just done!? Your lowly, inferior nation turns its blade on the Tzardom!? Someone kill this old bag of bones!”

With that call, the Temple Knights rushed to cut Harts down. With elegant

movements betraying his age, Harts stood on one hand and spun around like a top, unleashing a barrage of kicks. In an instant, five knights were decapitated and two of them were pierced through their chest plates.

“Wh-What... the...?”

“I tried turning my foot against you this time, instead of my blade. How was that?”

Luna chuckled at Harts’ remark, and the bishop turned beet red.

“G-Grr... Do you aim to start a war with the Light!?”

“If you wish. I’ll be waiting at Gatekeeper.”

“You bastard!” Just as the enraged bishop motioned to swing his staff, an eerie mechanical sound creaked through the air as the Guardian Angel reactivated. However, the light that shone through its metal plating was no longer green, but a menacing red. “Oh, Angel!” the bishop cried. “Purge those savages that dare oppose the Great Light!”

“Annihilation mode, activated. Searching for, Behemoth. Erased. Remnants, confirmed. Barbarians, confirmed. Distance, number, confirmed. Rearranging priority...”

As the mock-angel emitted bizarre, mechanical sounds, Luna cut the ropes that had tied Eagle to the cross and gently caressed her. Eagle had bruises all over her body, even her face was all swollen up. Luna was just as torn up, as she was feeling pain like a hundred daggers repeatedly stabbing her.

Luna remained silent for a moment, quietly enjoying their reunion. “Look what they did to you...”

“It’s all right,” Eagle answered. “I got to see you one last time.”

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘one last time?’”

“I’m cursed. No matter where I go, fighting and bloodshed follow me.”

Luna wanted to brush the comment off and just call Eagle an idiot, but her skills as a Holy Maiden allowed her to sense a strong negative force encasing Eagle. She could also sense that it would take a devastatingly long time to undo this curse. “M-My sister might...” Just as she said it, Luna realized how pointless

the idea was. If White, who excelled at Holy magic, performed rituals over the course of several years while utilizing the magic circles set up in the Holy Castle, Eagle's curse might weaken. Realistically, though, Luna couldn't ask White to do such a thing on top of her already overwhelming schedule. Besides, if she were to do such a thing for a demi-human, the entire nation of Holylight would lose its collective mind.

"Remnant, close range. Hawk-hybrid, confirmed. Annihilate." The mock-angel shook its massive body and stood up before turning to Luna and Eagle.

The bishop was the one surprised by this. "W-Wait! You can't kill that demi-human! Come on, men! Stop the Angel!"

A few of the knights reluctantly obeyed the bizarre order, and stood before the Guardian. In an instant, the mock-angel's arm blew off the upper bodies of all those knights.

"Wha—!?"

"It-It attacked us!"

"The Angel!?"

As the members of the Tzardom panicked, the mock-angel began stomping and bludgeoning the knights in the area, and flattening people like soda cans. The knights immediately seemed to forget their orders, scattering away from their positions.

"What are you doing!?" the bishop shrieked. "Bring me that demi-human! Commander, go!"

"I-I can't! That thing will kill me if I get near it!"

Luna and Eagle, too, lost their color at the mock-angel quickly approaching them. Its gargantuan stature, along with the inorganic red light, seemed to be a materialization of death. The pair fell silent, and the Guardian swung its murderous fist towards them.

"Lady Luna!" Harts jumped in between them and the arm, but ended up being blown away like a pebble. With what appeared to be the mere brush of an arm, Harts's sword was broken, his armor was shattered, and even his arms were

bent in unnatural directions. Harts still tried to stand in a show of undaunting willpower, but he felt something rush up his throat, and he vomited a large amount of blood. “What... monster...” Harts looked down to see that his right leg was gone from below the knee.

“Harts!” Luna cried.

“Lady Luna... Run... Now...”

Determined not to miss again, the mock-angel raised its foot into the air, ready to stomp their group flat.

“Luna...” Eagle whispered. “Get out of here without me...”

“No...! No! I finally, finally, got to see you again!” Luna embraced Eagle as if to protect her, holding on with all of her might.

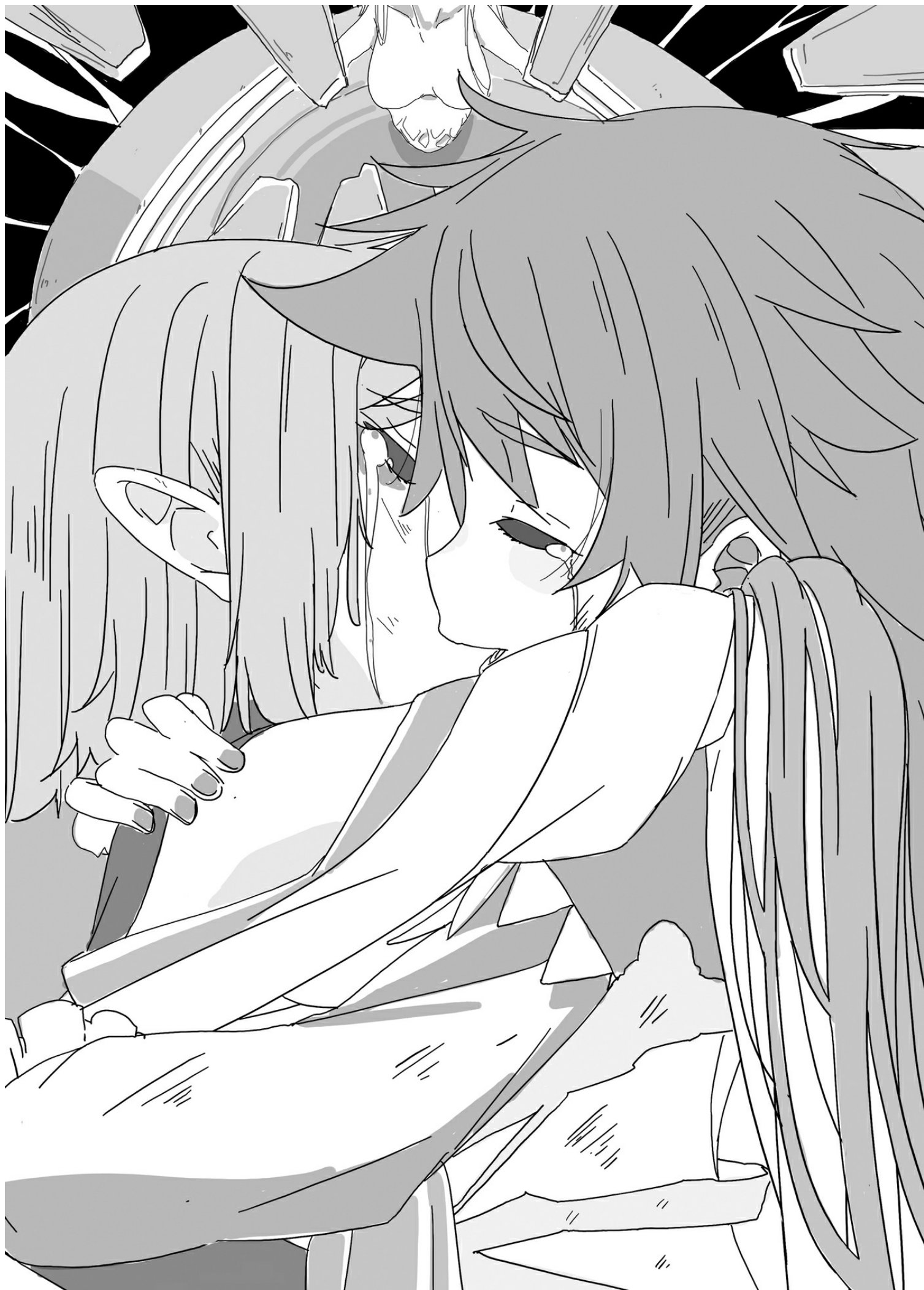
Eagle couldn’t hold back sobs at the kindness of her old friend. Her curse was going to cost her one more person dear to her heart. Eagle desperately tried to peel Luna off of her, but didn’t have enough strength left in her. The giant foot of the mock-angel cast a dark shadow on their faces. Knowing that her time had come, Luna showed a shy smile. The smile didn’t belong to Luna the Holy Maiden, but to a little girl named Luna Elegant.

“Look how far I’ve come... I always, always wanted you to see it.”

“You did... I am proud to be with you.”

“Eagle... I love you...”

They shared a serene moment, and closed their eyes.



With a terrifying burst of wind, the mock-angel's foot came down towards them. Luna and Eagle awaited their ends, embraced in each other's arms.

But their ends never came.

(What's going on...?) Luna timidly opened her eyes to see a pitch-black coat fluttering in the wind. The giant foot that was about to crush them had, ironically, been stopped by a single finger.



Luna knew just one person who could do such a ridiculous thing. The words bubbled up from the bottom of her heart, and she shouted them as loud as she could: “Demon Lord!”

The man who was called the Demon Lord managed to put a cigarette in his mouth and light it with his Zippo using only his left hand. Even such a showboating gesture seemed charming in Luna’s eyes. When he turned around, he was wearing the same old sarcastic grin. The only thing different from usual was the kindness in his eyes, as if he was looking at a mischievous cat. Luna could even anticipate the very words that would come out of his mouth.

“Didn’t I tell you? ‘Take your time and stay out of trouble.’”

“Idiot...” Tears rolled over Luna’s smile.

The Demon Lord let out a relenting sigh, and shifted his expression completely. “Get your foot off me, already. You Iron Giant knock-off...” The Demon Lord swung his right hand away as if he was swatting a fly, causing the gargantuan mock-angel to fall back like it was hit by a truck. “Now, let’s take a peek at who’s foolish enough to mess with us...”

With those words, a series of gunshots could be heard in the distance. The curtains were about to draw on the conflict fought over a particular demi-human.

Bop

Shortly before the Demon Lord came to save Luna, countless carriages were moving in and out of the village of Rabbi, unloading their cargo and heading off again on the double. Each carriage was piled high with all sorts of goods, and none of the drivers were willing to miss out on an opportunity like this. Some transportation agencies had even rented bulls from neighboring farmers to carry the extra load. They wouldn’t miss out on the chance to be paid so much for just a delivery.

Tahara watched the rapid cycle of drop-offs for a while before returning to the hot springs resort with a satisfied grin. When he entered the lobby, he found the Madam leisurely enjoying a cup of tea. Aku and Tron sat next to her

with glimmering eyes. Various dinnerware and decorations adorned the table, and apparently the Madam was giving a lesson in table manners. Tahara only gave a wink to the Madam, so as to not interrupt, and she returned a light chuckle. They were both tactful enough to communicate without words.

Tahara entered the staff room, where Yu had been organizing paperwork.

“Got some packages outside,” Tahara said.

“Yes. They’re apparently gifts from the Madam.”

‘Gifts’ was the most tame word she could have used to describe them. The current haul was only the merchandise bought by the caravan’s scouts. Once the goods purchased by the main caravan started arriving, the village would be met with quite a storm.

“The Secretary’s got a good eye for good people, like always.”

“I agree. I can’t trust anyone who’s shady with money, no matter how good at their job they are.”

Tahara had a slightly different take than Yu did. While Yu was as sharp as a whip, she had no regard for the subtleties of humans nor their hearts, no consideration for the ideals of the privileged nor the mindsets of the meek, and no care for their places in life. She considered it a waste of brain matter to think of such things. On the other hand, she surveyed humans scientifically, and all of her documents were meticulously detailed, logging any and all changes and reactions.

(If she could use even a fraction of her brain for other stuff...) Tahara couldn’t help but wish. While the Madam investing her earnings back into Rabbi was done in part from calculation and self-preservation, it was mostly an investment. The more the village developed and the more people gathered here, the more her own influence would grow, until her reach covered the entire continent. Unlike Tahara, Yu didn’t waste her time on analyzing the motives of others. (Being stuck in the mindset of someone with absolute power. That’s the very thing that brought down the Empire.) Tahara fell onto the couch, putting his feet up on the armrest.

One of Yu’s perfectly shaped brows rose at seeing Tahara act like a dad on

Saturday morning. “Don’t you have a lot of work to do?”

“Gonna keep things chill today. I got a feeling that the Secretary’s gonna give us a call.”

“What do you mean? He’s not supposed to be back, yet... Don’t tell me that Akane started some—”

“No, no. Apparently she got a big ol’ pat on the back for finding an Empire Mint.”

“...Oh. She’s not completely useless, after all.” A mixed emotion shaded Yu’s expression. While research and discovery were her specialty, Akane far surpassed her abilities when it came to things like excavation. That wasn’t a pleasant thought for Yu.

“Hey, Yu, what’s the thing we need the most, right now?”

“Easy. The Secretary’s lov—”

“Nah, that’s all you.” Tahara stared at the ceiling. While he appeared absentminded at first glance, this was the signature expression he showed when the cogs in his head were turning full speed. Knowing that full well, Yu spoke her conclusion.

“Time,” they muttered in unison. While Tahara’s and Yu’s brains were wired differently, they were both highly efficient and logical. Naturally, they reached the same answer.

“We’ve barely got our businesses started up in this tiny village,” Tahara explained. “We don’t even have the surrounding areas under our control, let alone the country we’re in.” In fact, the only land that could be considered under the Demon Lord’s control was the village of Rabbi. While they possessed a unique advantage through their hospital and hot springs resort, their influence was still heavily limited. They didn’t have nearly enough where it mattered to take on even the nobles of Holylight. “We can’t handle pressure from outside of the country on top of that, neither from some Tzardom nor this Xenobia country.”

“Just crush them. They’re all swarms of maggots.”

“It’s possible, but no. What’s the point of taking over a pile of ashes? The Secretary wants a legal conquest. The polar opposite of the Empire... where no one would even *think* of revolting.” Tahara figured this was why the Demon Lord was spending this much time to take control of Holylight. Yu couldn’t argue with that.

It would be possible for just the two of them to conquer the Tzardom and Xenobia by force, but that victory would come with catastrophic consequences. The conquered nations would always carry a grudge, and always look for an opportunity to revolt. That’s how the Empire was brought down from its glorious rule. From their creator’s point of view, the fall of the Empire was merely an end to an online game. To Yu or Tahara, it was recent history.

“Never again,” Tahara added. “That’s what the Secretary’s thinking. Which brings us to...” Tahara noticed that Yu was following, and continued. “It’s gonna take a little more time for us to gain control of this country and pave out a real solid foundation. I don’t want anyone sticking their noses in our business until then.”

“I agree. Which brings us to...?”

“I think the Secretary’s gonna *bop* the ones that’ve been sniffing around.” In response, Yu chortled, trying to hold in a laugh. In reality, the little ‘bop’ would cause blood to rain down from the sky. Thinking of the battle ahead of them, Tahara drew his revolver and spun its chamber, as if he was about to enter some shooting contest. “Speaking of him...” he remarked, receiving a Communication from the Demon Lord. “Shouldn’t take long, but take care of the village for me while I’m gone.”

Yu reluctantly accepted. “I guess I can’t go with the Secretary this time...”

“Didn’t you have your fill the last time around? And just so you know... it’s important to protect the house, too.”

“The house... Like a newlywed wife waiting for the return of her Sec— er, her husband...!” Yu began mumbling to herself.

“Uh... Not sure if you can hear me anymore, but I’m leaving.” Tahara waved at Yu and vanished via Quick Travel.

Once Tahara met the Demon Lord outside of the city, they jumped to Suneo at once.

The Perfect Game

——A tall hill in Suneo.

The Demon Lord was silently cursing as he watched the capital from a nearby hill.

(What the hell is going on!?)

The city was engulfed in roaring flames and blood-curdling screams, at the center of which stood a gigantic demon and some golem-ish thing of a similar size. Who wouldn't want to scream in protest at this sight?

Tahara, on the other hand, was snickering beside the Demon Lord with a cigarette in his mouth. "Now, that's what I call a party."

"Indeed..."

"What a nice little tee-up, eh, Mister Secretary?"

(What are you talking about, Tahara!? Don't you see that Kaiju fest out there!?)

To the Demon Lord, he was facing down a literal Godzilla rampage. In fact, the Demon Lord had only intended to check on Luna, and had only brought the knowledgeable Tahara to back him up if he should get into some kind of trouble. He had not expected anything like this in his wildest dreams.

"Hm, that's the little Demi girl out there, huh?" Tahara noticed. "Looks like Xenobia's somewhere behind this, too."

"Indeed..."

"I certainly didn't expect the Satanists to join the fray. *Bop* three birds with one stone, eh? You always know how to set a stage."

"It's mere coincidence."

"Ha! Don't make me laugh, Mister Secretary. As if this kind of thing *could* happen by coincidence."

(Dammit. He's convinced I've orchestrated the whole thing!) Under the mask of a dauntless smile, the Demon Lord was in turmoil. As far as he knew, he really had nothing to do with the whole thing, so Tahara's words were a completely false accusation.

Tahara had expected the Demon Lord to throw a little jab to keep the Tzardom and Xenobia off their backs for a while, but not that he would bring the Satanists into the mix. Who else could have set up a stage to *bop* three separate forces with one jab?

(For real, what do I do, now...? It's a horrible sight.) The Demon Lord was reminded of scenes in the past: the attack on Yahooo, the terrorism on the Holy City, and the Invasion in Rookie. Each of those attacks were devastating enough to reduce a city to rubble. To continue with the pattern of each attack, the Satanists and another mysterious group were robbing the city blind and setting more buildings aflame. Some of them seemed to be hunting down women, and there were even monsters running around. It was a true hellscape.

(I bet that *thing's* laughing its ass off watching this...) The Demon Lord recalled the mysterious being he had faced off with in the bottom of the Bastille Dungeon. The Demon Lord collected himself and turned to Tahara. "We're going to stifle this mess. Get rid of anyone that stands in your way."

"Aye-aye. I take it the big one's all yours, sir?"

"Yes. I should—"

A blinding, gold beam struck out of the sky, penetrating the giant devil. Its incredible power wiped away the grin from Tahara's face.

"Hyow! Luna Girl's packing a punch...! Can't blame you for bringing her in first thing. That would hurt more than a little bit!"

"Indeed..." Scared that Tahara was overestimating him again, the Demon Lord frowned, remembering the time he took a hit of Luna's magic. It had been a golden blade at the time, but the attack that just took place was more of a satellite laser. His advisors wouldn't get away scot-free after a hit of that beam, let alone himself.

"That took care of one of the big boys. All right, I'll head out."

“Go. You can take care of most things at your own discretion.”

Tahara gave a two-finger salute and leapt off of the hill. Time to take care of business. At the same time, guns materialized above the city and began flying to and fro like rabid hounds.

“Let’s get to work, boys,” Tahara called out. “Let’s get this over with.” An up-tempo *prat-prat-prats* echoed through the city, which in of itself was rather soothing. The most ubiquitous machine gun ever made, the M16A4 spewed out bullets without mercy. With a firing rate of fifteen rounds per second, the arm never stopped popping. Meanwhile, a sniper rifle poised on the hill scoped over the entire city, taking out targets in the distance.

“Wh-What the hell is that!?”

“Magic! Someone cast a spell to— *argh!*”

To Tahara, the Satanists, the Tzardom’s knights, and anyone wreaking havoc were enemies and targets. The gliding guns above the streets effortlessly lengthened its chain of dead bodies.

When Tahara made it through the main street, he ducked into an alley and came across an incident of a different nature. “Look who’s getting it on this early. You guys do an honorable job, alright.”

Eight men who appeared to be Temple Knights were pinning a pair of women to the ground, tearing at their clothes. The faces of both women were bruised and swollen, indicative of the violence they must have suffered. In any day and age, the weak became prey when push came to shove.

“Huh?” The knights turned to Tahara.

“The hell are you...?”

“This hick doesn’t know who we are.”

“With our full armor on, and everything... What stupid little village are you from?”

The knights guffawed, as if they had just found a new playmate. The Temple Knights were proud and resilient people for the most part, but some of them stationed away from home seemed to have degraded themselves to thugs.

Tahara drew his gleaming, silver revolver and pulled the trigger without another word. With each shot, a hole appeared through a knight's head. Six bullets took the lives of six people. Tahara's revolver was a Peacemaker, used by many sheriffs in the Wild West. Whatever Tahara's intentions, the gun was apt for taking out lawless thugs.

"What the hell!?"

"What did he just do!?"

As the remaining two knights freaked out, Tahara flicked his revolver open and began swiftly reloading. He was looking at the knights like he would some alien creature.

"Uh... Not sure why you're just standing there. You're about to die." Without hesitation, he planted a bullet into each knight's head, restoring quiet to this particular alley.

The women whom Tahara had saved seemed dumbfounded for a few moments before crying in joy. They must have seen him as a bona fide hero.

"Th-Thank you so much!"

"You saved our lives! You're so courageous!"

The girls ran straight to Tahara, who jumped to the side and avoided them, causing the girls to fall straight on their faces.

"Who do you idiots think you are? Unless your name's Manami, stay away from me."

Some hero he was. With that, Tahara leapt up the nearest wall to climb onto the roof and scouted the area. He spotted the Ruteman manor, home to one of the wealthiest families in Suneo. On the roof of said building, about thirty people were gathered in a group with the sadistic Barbarians surrounding them.

"Geh heh heh... Which one should we eat, next...?"

"Eenie, meenie, miney, mo... Geh heh heh!"

The crowd of residents embraced each other, quaking in fear. The Barbarian's finger had stopped to point at a man.

“P-Please, no! I don’t want to d— *Aaaargh!*”

Flames erupted all over the man’s body, sending him into a tragic dance of fire. No matter how much he rolled, and even if he had dove into a pool of water, the fire would not go out. It was a form of curse, and the only way to put the fire out was to kill the Barbarian who started it.

“Geh heh heh... Ta-da!”

“It’s too small. Let’s put more of them in, next time!”

The Barbarians picked blood-red stones out of the charred corpse, tossing them into their mouths and grinding them down with their teeth. Barbarians, also known as Fire Eaters, were famous for eating Fire Spellstones, but also for burning humans into this material called Flame Gems before eating them. These monsters were particularly abhorred in mines, where they would always cause terrible destruction.

“Let’s burn a bunch together!”

“Geh heh! You, you, and you!”

A woman, a child, and an old man, all apparently chosen at random, were instantly engulfed in flames. When someone burned to death, their direct cause of death was most likely suffocation. While they ran out of oxygen, the three thrashed about, screaming in agony.

“Humans so weak! Humans burn bright! So dumb! So brittle!”

“Humans cry so loud! They’re not cool! So pathetic!”

These monsters weren’t called Barbarians for nothing. The savage creatures now turned to Ruteman, the owner of the manor, and his daughter.

“W-Wait! Please, spare my daughter!”

“Father...!”

“Hmm?” One of the Barbarians scanned the crowd. “Raise your hand if you want to get crispy next!”

“Geh heh! No one at all! Not cool, humans!”

The other Barbarians laughed, still munching on Flame Gems.

Ruteman had advertised that he would be looking for a fiancée for his daughter once she turned sixteen. Many hopeful young men had come to the manor this day, but every single one of them were busy keeping themselves curled up and trying not to get picked by the Barbarians. After all, who would volunteer for such a gruesome death at the hands of these monsters? The monsters, on the other hand, found the weakness and cowardice of humanity incredibly amusing.

“So weak! Let’s start with daddy over here!”

“Do we burn the rest of these pathetic dudes? Or should we just go for the daughter now?”

“Come on! Who wants to be eaten, next!?”

“You,” a voice answered.

“Huh...?” A Barbarian’s head exploded all over the roof.

Tahara surveyed the scene without a shred of enthusiasm. In contrast to his nonchalant expression, he was holding the rugged M1887, a lever-action shotgun from the good old days.

“You monsters really are disgusting. I don’t even know what to say,” Tahara added, forgetting that he was by far the most lacking of etiquette out of the advisors.

The remaining Barbarians sprung into action at the sudden appearance of a powerful human.

“Don’t get cocky, human! Geh heh heh! Burn, baby, burn!” With the pointing of its finger, flames erupted on Tahara like the other victims. However, he began taking leisurely steps towards the Barbarians instead of rolling around in agony. “Geh heh... Huh?”

“Hot,” Tahara simply said. Before the monster knew, the barrel of the gun was touching its head, which in an instant blew into pieces. The flames around Tahara dissipated, revealing his unchanged expression. Pumping out the casing by cocking the gun, Tahara lit his cigarette using a straggling flame on his shoulder. “Thanks for the light. You guys can be considerate, after all.”

“Stupid little human!”

“Fire no good, use claws!”

“Don’t you guys just... Ah, whatever,” Tahara relented, and closed his eyes to enjoy a puff of smoke as one of the Barbarians charged at him. At first glance, it would have looked like Tahara was giving up.

“Geh heh heh, now die!” It swung its sinister claws at Tahara, evoking screams from the group of residents. A Barbarian’s claw could easily tear through steel armor, after all. This time, however, it would not be so easy.

—Combat Skill: Counter

(50% chance to reflect the damage back to the enemy.)

“Geh heh!? O-Ow ow ow ow!”

“Ugh...” Tahara grumbled. “Coming right at me without a shred of strategy or forethought? Who the hell trained you? The players I faced switched up tactics, routes, numbers, anything they could think of to get to us.” Tahara exhaled a puff of smoke, expecting the impossible from his enemies. Naturally, no one in this world knew a thing about any of the advisors, so there was no way for anyone to strategize against them. “I’m getting tired of this, just line up. I don’t have time to goof around, anyway.”

“Who do you think you are, human!?”

“Geh heh! Everyone, get him!”

“Kill! Kill! Kill!”

The lot of Barbarians initiated an all-out assault against Tahara, some with their fangs, some with their claws, and others with fire. Still, Tahara remained completely unwavering, looking as if he was just deciding what to have for dinner.

“Th-This is weird, he won’t die! He’s just a human!”

“Nice try, fellas.” A casual blast of the shotgun blew off another head. At this point, it was a one-sided massacre. Cock, ping, blam. Tahara shot them all at close range, as if they were just deer in headlights. Any native of this world would think that the shotgun was some sort of magical club.

“Guess that does it.” Just as he muttered so, a violent gust blew from the center of the city, changing the look on his face. The residents of the city, on the other hand, seemed oblivious. What was happening to their capital was now too far beyond them. “Yikes, fun’s over! I gotta take care of that before I end up killed!” He jumped off the roof in a hurry, in contrast to his completely unfazed demeanor he had just had.

Before the people left on the roof had a chance to celebrate their survival, a powerful shockwave rattled the manor from its foundation. Without comprehending what was going on, they all dove down in a desperate attempt not to get blown away by the storm.

“Father, where has he gone...!?”

“I don’t know! Just stay down!”

As father and daughter shouted in the gusts, the Satanists were sprinting through the streets in order to make it out of the city. The attack they had started on a whim for some pillaging and senseless revenge had turned into a devastating catastrophe. None of the Satanist grunts had expected this outcome.

“Damn! How did this happen!?”

“Where’s Comrade Garcia!?”

“We have to get underground, go!”

They ran towards their rendezvous, the underground bunker, as fast as they could.

Many of their comrades were waiting for them when they arrived.

“What is happening!?”

“Everything up there’s burning to ashes!”

“If this is all of the survivors, we have about half...”

Considering how eager they had been at the beginning, this was a shocking rate of casualties. In fact, fleeing in defeat after deploying the Entranced *and* summoning a devil was unthinkable.

“So that’s where... Thanks for showing me to your hive.” Tahara’s voice echoed in the darkness.

“Wh-Who are you!?”

“I saw him above ground! You must be with the Tzardom or the Holy Maiden!”

Tahara didn’t answer, but only observed the underground bunker. It was ludicrously large, bigger than a baseball stadium. He even spotted a few light fixtures, and plumbing on the walls and ceiling.

(It’s a really old facility, almost like a shelter...) Even Tahara had to think about the implications of this. That being said, he had already acquired a sort of hint to the answer. (The Secretary did give me that gun. Is this some of the ancient technology we’ve been talking about? Knowing him, this was all part of the plan, too... Now that I’m here, it even feels like he called me up just to show me this. Ugh. It ain’t easy working for a boss who can outsmart you in his sleep.) Tahara shook his head in exasperation and lit the cigarette in his mouth.

If the Demon Lord had heard Tahara’s internal monologue, he would have shouted something like ‘How the hell should I know any of this!?’

“All right,” Tahara said. “I’d better clean up quick and head back. I’m sure things are already taken care of up there.” Numerous camouflage-patterned panels appeared behind Tahara. These were portals to a dedicated dimension where Tahara stored his guns, but they must have appeared as some terrifying magic circles to the Satanists.

“Those... Magic circles! He’s going to do something!”

“Magic Defense! Now!”

“Wh-What spell are we even defending against!?”

Despite the Satanists’ efforts to do something about the impending attack, the only thing that came from the panels was a trove of guns that they were completely unfamiliar with. They could see that some were shaped like clubs and others were shaped like short spears, but they had no idea what any were capable of. So, they decided to deploy one Wind Shield after another, which defended against physical attacks and the four major elements.

47 guns floating in the air together was quite the sight, and if the Satanists had known what they were capable of, they would have run with their tails between their legs. All sorts of firearms were included in the line-up: handguns, machine guns, shotguns, even tommy guns, anti-tank rifles, and grenade launchers.

“You sure that’s enough protection...?”

With a familiar line, every firearm unleashed their fury at once. The clamor of a thousand thunderbolts roared through the underground bunker, blowing the Satanists away as if a hurricane had hit them. Their defenses did little more than a piece of paper would have against the barrage of bullets. The sight of each gun autonomously filling the Satanists with holes looked more like a simple clean-up job than anything resembling combat. On top of it, Tahara layered his equipped skills onto the storm of bullets.

He strolled through the bunker, singing an old folk song.

Is that a passing shower, or rain over in Chino? —**First Skill: Rapidfire**

Hear that sound, coming around, —**Second Skill: Bullet Storm**

Wetting you from head to toe. —**Third Skill: Fire Away**

Rapidfire boosted their damage by 15, while Bullet Storm added another 10-15, but with a 75% chance of rupturing the enemies’ arteries. Back in the Game, a ruptured artery was a troublesome condition that rapidly drained one’s Stamina every time they took an action. Then Fire Away came and sealed the deal — this skill boosted the attack’s damage by [the number of bullets in the gun’s magazine] x1.5, in exchange for emptying the magazine.

By the time Tahara’s guns had expended all of the bullets in their magazines, the bunker was filled by silence, and not a single surviving Satanist. All that remained were unrecognizable chunks of flesh.

“This place is weird...” Tahara remarked. “No bullet holes.” He ran his hand over the concrete-like wall, completely ignoring the meat strewn about the floor. If the walls had been made of ordinary concrete, Tahara’s attack would have demolished them, to say nothing of bullet holes. In fact, the entire bunker could have collapsed. (Never had a wall stay standing after I shot it up...) Tahara

knocked on the wall a few times, only to feel its bare-bone solidity. He couldn't make out if it was reinforced with magic or if it had been treated in some other way. (Whatever. Guess the Secretary's gonna solve this mystery.) Tahara left the bunker, overestimating the Demon Lord, as always.

Moments after Tahara had leapt off of the hill and into the city, the Demon Lord was observing the capital, trying to scope out the situation the best he could. It was a difficult task after stumbling upon what resembled a war-torn battleground. He recalled his conversations with Tahara, attributing the information to what he saw before him.

(It sounds like the one crucified over there is Luna's friend. And the 'Tzardom' is where that hero's from...) He began piecing it together. He knew that Luna would come here to take back what was dear to her, no matter who she had to fight. Since he had heard the word 'slave' in one of his Communications, he figured that situation out rather quickly. (I didn't expect the people of this country to do something so appalling...) The Demon Lord was drawn to the paladin and his work, in some way. He couldn't make sense of the hellscape before him contrasted with the paladin, full of kindness, serving hot meals to the poor. (Looks like he's stuck with some garbage country.)

The Demon Lord reached that conclusion, skipping some steps along the way. The Tzardom had captured Luna's friend and was keeping the hero tied down. That made things easy. (I don't care if they're a country of this "Light" or any other God there is... They just stirred the wrong pot.) Anger began to curdle within the Demon Lord. This man was just as self-centered as Luna was, but his selfishness and stubbornness were unparalleled. Then, he spotted a figure in the distance. (Is that Luna...?) The one stumbling along was incongruous with the prideful Luna he knew. In fact, this person seemed like she couldn't afford to spare any attention for her appearance at all. The Demon Lord recalled the conversation he had with Luna one night.

I'm just wondering if... She'll hear about this village if it gets famous, wherever she is, Luna had said.

It will be famous. This village will be known farther and wider than any other town out there.

As he remembered his affirmative response, the Demon Lord chuckled in exasperation. (I better keep my word,) he thought. (But taking on a foreign nation for a friend...? You're pretty badass.) Then the Demon Lord activated one skill after another as his boiling emotion dictated, just as the golem-like construct began rampaging.

—**Survival Skill: Fighting Spirit**

—**Combat Skills: Fake Out, Intimidate, Equal to None**

Overwhelming power erupted from the pit of his gut, and the Demon Lord Quick Traveled to Luna.

He felt no pressure from the foot he had stopped with a single finger. With his other hand, he reached for and leisurely lit a cigarette. As he had his usual back-and-forth with Luna, he pushed the annoying doll off of him and turned to Luna's friend, who had obviously been under much more horrific conditions than he had imagined. (This kid looks awful... Are these bastards for real?) Eagle was torn up from head to toe, with numerous lacerations and bruises all over her body. Her face was the worst of it all. (Looks worse than a UFC fighter after a match...)

After taking in her condition, the Demon Lord started crafting some items. His pick was the Tea Party Set, an adorable platter of hot tea and apple pie. He crafted two sets and set them down by Luna and Eagle.

"A reunion is a joyous occasion. Why don't you toast to it with some tea?"

"Y-You know the trouble we're in, right...? I— Mmm! It's so good!" Luna shouted, having reflexively taken a bite out of the apple pie. In addition to being perfectly delicious, the Tea Party Set healed the user's HP and Stamina by 30. Items that healed both parameters at the same time were hard to come by even in the Game, making this particular item a very valuable one among players. "Wait, Harts is hurt, too! Do something, Demon Lord!"

"As if I'm some cat robot from the future..." he muttered, and followed Luna's gesture to find a seriously injured old man. Both of his arms were broken, and his right leg had been torn off.

(Harts...) The Demon Lord searched his memory, and remembered that

Tahara and the Madam had often mentioned that name, and that he led a group of militaristic nobles. (Could be my chance to earn a favor. Things'll get annoying if the powerful people decide they don't like us.) The Demon Lord immediately switched his attitude. With a pitiful look on his face, he picked up the blown-off leg from the ground. As he snubbed his finished cigarette into his portable ashtray, he crafted a roll of Bandage.

"Allow me to commend you for your bravery, good sir."

"Who... Are you...?" Harts muttered, ignoring his agony for the time being.

The Demon Lord had just stopped the attack of a mock-angel with a single finger, and then spontaneously produced food and items from a strange void in the air. Harts couldn't believe that he was speaking to a mere human.

"This is nothing more than first aid, but I'll tie this around your wound. I'll have my subordinate properly examine you later." The Demon Lord held the leg to where it used to be and wrapped the Bandage around the stub. As soon as he did, Harts could feel his leg again, and he groaned in amazement.

"And to your arms." The Demon Lord swiftly bent Harts's arms back the right way and wrapped them up. "It would be an invaluable loss to our nation if you couldn't take command with those injuries."

The Bandage was another precious item from the game that healed most wounds with time. As sensation returned to his severed leg and pain faded from his body, Harts was met with horror.

"It can't be... You're... the real... Demon Lord...!?"

"Drink this. It'll help with the pain." The Demon Lord pressed a metal can labeled Monstrous Energy into Harts' mouth, as if to shut him up. This was another fantastic item that healed both the user's HP and Stamina by 50.

"I-Impossible... How are my wounds... The pain is... fading...!?"

The Demon Lord didn't answer Harts, and turned to the golem he had blown away. It appeared to be something very precious to the people of the Tzardom, as they gathered around the behemoth and were desperately calling to it.

"Ludicrous. What do they expect a soulless doll to do for them...? In any day

and age, humans are the only ones who create and build,” the Demon Lord noted, watching the heartlessly mechanical golem twitch. It was a sentiment he held as a creator, and a show of pride as Akira Ono. If it was up to him, he would have never built such a failure.

Harts, on the other hand, interpreted the Demon Lord’s remark completely differently. If the being before him was truly the Fallen Angel Lucifer, the legendary Demon Lord himself... Harts didn’t understand why he expected so much from humanity. It didn’t match up to the entire narrative of Lucifer’s myth as the one who fought against the Great Light and the entire human race, choosing to rule the night instead.

“You’re...”

“Rest for a while, sir...” The Demon Lord stood up and left the confused Harts, approaching Luna.

Luna, apparently relieved by the Demon Lord’s appearance, was forcibly shoving an apple pie into Eagle’s mouth. “Come on, eat it! I hate to admit it, but the treats he brings out are amazing... And I don’t know how, but they give me lots of energy.”

“W-Wait, Luna. It’s not the time for swee— Urm!”

“Just eat, already! Don’t you talk back to me! Here, now tea!”

“Grrm...!”

The sight was far from an elegant tea party, but having those items shoved down her throat, Eagle immediately began to regain some vitality. While she was met with considerable culture shock from tasting the no-less-than-exquisite apple pie and tea of the Empire, she couldn’t make any sense out of them healing her wounds.

Seeing that the two girls had regained a little bit of strength, the Demon Lord began talking to them in a stylized tone.

“You’re Luna’s friend, right? It looks like you’ve seen some tough times.”

“U-Um... Th-Thank you...”

“Hey, Demon Lord!” Luna barked. “Stop scaring Eagle with your scary face!”

(I was just talking to her!) Mumbling something about ‘I can never have a normal conversation...’ the Demon Lord lit another cigarette. It was a little concerning that Luna’s friend still looked as sorrowful as she did before.

“I-I can’t thank you enough for saving me... but I-I have a curse—”

“It’ll be fine,” Luna interrupted. “I’ll... ask Sister to do it, somehow. It’ll be fine.”

“No, Luna... I’m just happy that I got to see you one last time.”

The Demon Lord watched the heartfelt conversation as he exhaled smoke. Of course, he was remembering the incident at the Shinto shrine.

“Another curse... I’m tired of hearing that word.” The Demon Lord quickly crafted the Altar of Decursing and held it to Eagle. Instantly, a black aura emerged from her and sizzled, as if it was in agony. Soon, it burst and dissipated. Luna and Eagle appeared dumbfounded for a few moments before beginning to clamor at the Demon Lord.

“Wh-What the—!? What did you do, Demon Lord!?”

“What came out of me...? N-No... It can’t be...!”

“Decursing class dismissed. Let’s hear what they have to say for themselves.” The Demon Lord began walking toward the center of the capital. He was going to demand some answers for why they put Luna in jeopardy and tormented her friend to that degree. “Now, who’s going to pay for the damages...?”

“W-W-Watch your mouth in the presence of the Angel!” the bishop screeched in delirium.

The Demon Lord furrowed his brow at the bishop calling the giant piece of machinery an ‘angel’ of all things. “An angel...? This hunk of metal?”

“You’re the one called the Demon Lord! A devil worshiper, no doubt! Oh, the unbearable corruption of Holylight that they are tied to Satanists on top of demi-humans! The filth! Our holy nation will learn the true history of what transpired here, and hunt down every last one of you!”

The Demon Lord puffed his cigarette without a word while the bishop spoke. His glare sharpened as he realized that the bishop wasn’t giving him any

rational answer, let alone the one he was looking for.

“How is it that a piece of shit like you, that gets off on torturing women, can still try to spew human-sounding nonsense out of your shit-covered mouth?” The Demon Lord spat an insult that would make Zero proud. Of course, he was also the creator of Zero, so it might have been a natural reaction.

“Wh— H— Dare... Someone kill this Satanist! He desecrates the Light!”

“Yes, sir! With pleasure!”

Just as the commander drew his sword, the Demon Lord threw Sodom’s Fire at him, too fast for the bishop to even see his hand move. In the blink of an eye, the commander’s head was obliterated and his body was engulfed in black flames. The members of the Tzardom stood aghast at the sudden turn of events, then began to panic as they saw the commander’s corpse collapse to the ground in flames.

“Wh-What the hell is that thing!? It’s a monster!”

“Wake up, Dear Angel, please!”

“A devil! It’s another devil!”

Whether their desperation was heard by it or not, the mock-angel glowed red and sat up. The humans of the Tzardom jumped in joy.

“*Beep beep,*” it started. “Anomaly, confirmed. Search database... No match found. Black remnant, white remnant. Number 999, confirmed. Initiate annihilation...”

“Oh, the Angel prays!”

“Hahaha! The Angel will strike you down!”

“You will be smote, Devil!”

“Dear Angel, rain your divine wrath upon this filth!”

The Demon Lord was having a hard time holding back laughter as he listened to them shout and chant. He felt like he was watching a farce, at this point.

“Smote? Divine wrath? That’s too rich, coming from the pieces of shit that blew up an entire city, scum that tortures women! Bah ha ha ha!” The Demon

Lord's maniacal guffaw broke through his restraint.

The members of the Tzardom were enraged by this evil entity, completely fearless of the Angel.

"Have you no fear for divine punishment!?"

"The Angel's just wrath will send you to hell!"

"Oh, Great Light, oh dear God! Rain down your retribution upon this man!"

At each of their prayers, the Demon Lord's laughter only grew. He didn't, and never had, believe in any god. The only things Akira Ono had faith in were himself and his creations.

"Fine, then keep praying to that 'god' of yours!"

—Duel Skill: Gotta Kill Them All

(+44 to Attack, Defense, and Dexterity. +444 to Max HP. Negates all counterattacks. Expires after set time.)

With the activation of this hellish Duel Skill, the capital was met with more wind — this time, a sinister whirlwind. The urge for violence and destruction curdled within the Demon Lord until black light began to emanate from his eyes. He was indeed worthy of his title and people's assumptions, at least in this moment. Meanwhile, the Guardian rose to its feet, light concentrating in its right hand. It contrasted the Demon Lord as a holy beacon of light, ready to vanquish evil. Everyone in the capital watched in awe as light concentrated in the Guardian's hand. Once that was unleashed, it would surely obliterate any devil, no matter how powerful it was.

With a glare at the Guardian, the Demon Lord muttered, "you'll *stay* down, this time."

The enormous beam of light was fired, and the Demon Lord threw his fully-powered Sodom's Fire at it straight on. The blinding beam collided with the all-consuming black flames in the center of the capital... and the beam was scattered, dissipating into the air. Sodom's Fire, on the other hand, did not slow down, and struck the body of the mock-angel. With a shuddering roar, countless cracks ran through its body. With an expert Chain Attack to follow up,

the mock-angel blew into countless pieces.

“N...No...”

“The Angel... lost...?”

The Demon Lord kept moving as the members of the Tzardom were frozen in shock. Mentally excluding one of them from his targets, he set eyes on all of the knights before him.

—First Skill: Charge

With his body strengthened to the max, the Demon Lord leapt, crashing through the group of knights. They flew as if they had been run over by a truck, and the Demon Lord then cast the light of judgment into them.

“Cancel Combo.”

—Third Skill: Supersonic

Countless bolts of lightning crackled from the Sodom’s Fire littering the area, evaporating the knights in a painless instant. It looked as if the knights had offended God himself and were struck by wrathful lightning from above. Not that the Demon Lord had any symbolic intent behind his method of attack, but he could not have chosen a better one if he had tried.

“How could this be...?” the bishop muttered, left all alone. “My angel... My knights...” He fell to his knees, as if he had just gambled his life savings away. The ‘angel’ and the mighty Knights’ Order were nowhere to be found, all before he could even process what was happening. “Im...possible... The Light, the Angel can’t... *lose*...”

The Demon Lord kicked a piece of metal that was once a part of the so-called angel. He found no value in the thing that clanked across the ground toward the bishop.

“I’ve killed every powerful player or god I’ve come across. Don’t equate me to that piece of junk.”

“Pla— God...? D-Dear Moira! Why have you forsaken me and my devotion to you!?” the bishop shouted to the heavens. The Demon Lord frowned and lit another cigarette, assuming that the man was in a state of shock. “Moira,

Goddess of Destiny! I have always worshiped and honored you! Give me one more chance! Change my destiny with your power!”

The Demon Lord recalled his distant past as he exhaled a puff of smoke. There were plenty of times when he wanted to pray for someone somewhere to help him. There were times when he wanted to cry out in pain. There were too many situations to count where he had no control over something. Every time, the Demon Lord had scorned no one but himself and stood back up on his own two feet.

“Goddess of Destiny...” the bishop continued. “In prayer, I beg you! You will have nothing but my unending devotion...!”

The Demon Lord watched as the bishop waited for a blessing from the heavens like a baby bird in a nest, shrieking. He no longer concealed the disgust he felt for the bishop.

“What Goddess of Destiny!? If there really is such a thing, she’s nothing more than a whore who sides with the victor after the fact!”

“H-How dare you speak of Goddess Moira that way...!”

“Apparently, she decided to kneel before me today.” The Demon Lord grabbed the bishop by the collar and slammed his fist into his face. He had restrained himself as much as possible, but his fist still destroyed the bishop’s nose and shattered many of his teeth. “You didn’t think you could get away so easily after the mess you made, did you?”

He had gone through the trouble of excluding the bishop from his attack so he could hold him accountable for the whole debacle. He wasn’t going to foot the bill for any of these damages. Despite his all-too-serious demeanor, he was acting more like a politician by dodging the bullet of responsibility.

“Uh, can I butt in for a sec, Mister Secretary?”

“Tahara. I trust you’ve finished your end.”

“Didn’t take long. Back to this guy... Can you leave him to me?”

“What for...?” the Demon Lord asked, secretly terrified. The last thing he wanted was for this whole incident to somehow end up his fault.

Meanwhile, Tahara had been kicking at pebbles or staring into nothing, avoiding making eye contact with the Demon Lord at all cost. The black whirlwind around him, exuding an aura of 'Kill Them All', was still present, as his Duel Skill was still in effect. Tahara didn't want to even be near the Demon Lord right now. As he smoked his cigarette, he couldn't help but silently scream. (This isn't even funny! Why's my boss this fucking scary!? A black *whirlwind* follows him!? What the hell!? This is a hostile work environment!)

At the same time, the Demon Lord exhaled into the sky and internally screamed. (Does he really think I set this whole mess up!? Are you kidding me!? I'm just a victim in all this! I can't afford to pay for the damages!)

Tahara was the one to break them out of the all-too-ridiculous stand-off of them being afraid of each other. He drew his sniper rifle and shot at the side of one of the buildings. A paper fell off, and Hanzo came crawling out. The Demon Lord couldn't conceal his surprise at the girl, who was obviously a ninja.

"The chick from Xenobia. Nice to see you again. Looks like you put in a lot of work, but well... You've seen it all. Just tell your boss exactly what happened here."

"What, are you talking about...? I've never seen you before."

"In the village of Rabbi. Come on, don't give me the cold shoulder."

"You must be mistaking me for someone else. I've never—"

"You can disguise yourself and change your voice all you want, but you're not gonna fool me. There's plenty of obvious tells. Your breathing, the way you move your eyes, your bone structure, gestures, how you walk, the movement in your throat when you talk, how often you blink..."

Oblivious to what Tahara was talking about, the Demon Lord simply enjoyed his cigarette with a faint grin as if he was privy to everything he was saying. It might have appeared like him taking part in shaking the ninja down.

"While we're here, would you like to say a word or two, Mister Secretary?"

(Stop! Roping me! Into things!) The Demon Lord knew nothing about their conversation, so he decided to just be honest. "You seemed to be from a fun country. I'll have to stop by and say hello."

“Da ha ha ha!” Tahara burst out laughing. “A *hello* from the Secretary! Ain’t nothing scarier than that!”

(It’s just a hello!) The Demon Lord wanted to cry at Tahara’s unwavering trust — if he could call it that — in his abilities, but it seemed that Hanzo was the one closest to tears. She was just told that this supernatural being was about to pay her country a visit.

“I formally declare to Holylight... that our nation had nothing to do with this incident...!”

“Yeah, sure thing. I’d like to believe that, but I don’t think the Secretary’s too happy right now.” Tahara chuckled away, adding to the list of false accusations against the Demon Lord.

Hanzo bit her lips and fled the scene like the wind.

“All right, Mister Secretary. You good with leaving me in charge of the Tzardom front? I’ll leave little Xenobia to you.”

“Indeed...” The Demon Lord gave a little nod.

Tahara threw the bishop over his shoulders and cheerfully headed over to Luna and Eagle, ready to take all of them back to the village of Rabbi. At the end of the day, the Demon Lord had not only shown off his strength to the Tzardom and Xenobia to discourage any attacks, he had also saved Luna’s friend and even earned a favor from the leader of the military nobles. To top it off, he had eliminated a band of Satanists while saving Suneo. This country owed a large debt to the Demon Lord.

Tahara thought, once again, that the Demon Lord had pulled off a perfect game. He had controlled the movement of every single piece on the board. Meanwhile, a Communication reached the Demon Lord as he was wrangling with his ever-growing reputation. He couldn’t help but feel a little relieved by the nonchalant voice that came into his head.

Hey hey, Hakuto. Can you hear me?

What’s wrong?

Come on, can’t you be a little excited? Like you just got a call from your long-

distance girlfriend?

I don't have a girlfriend. Get to the point or I'm hanging up.

Wait, I was just kidding! Remember that terrible place we talked about? Well, I found it. Gonna go beat them up.

Hold on... I don't know what place you mean, but wait until I—

I'm going to kick some butts, Hakuto. Can't wait for you to tell me what a good job I did... Love you!

Wai—

Akane hung up, leaving the Demon Lord to groan to himself again. He wanted to believe that her sign-off was only in jest, but even he didn't know what Akane would get herself into when she was left unsupervised. The Demon Lord hurried away via Quick Travel.

Gradually, the entire continent was being sucked into this tornado of confusion. God only knew what awaited the Demon Lord in the wake of it.

Epilogue

A strange creature was running through the streets at night. The thing had once been a human man called Garcia. While its limbs and body were similar to that of a human's, its face was replaced with an eerie shield-like object with numerous tentacles protruding from it. This was a monster called a Messenger, and while they weren't strong on their own, they could manipulate most creatures and incite them to their cause.

"Dammit, this isn't good...!" one of the tentacles cursed. The Holy Maiden's assassination was really just an excuse to kill as many people as possible. The Ancient Devil had been the perfect tool for that, but it had been defeated, much to the Messenger's surprise. Considering that the Holy Maiden's powers had explosively increased during the combat, their idea might have even ended up aiding the enemy more than hurting them. "Whatever. I'll agitate where there's more people next time. Might be fun to do it in central Holylight or inside Dona's territory." One of the tentacles let out an eerie chuckle as the creature increased its speed. It loved to influence as many people as possible, making them dance in the palm of its hand. In fact, it *lived* for it.

When it began to daydream of what kind of people it wanted to toy with next, it suddenly faltered and hit the ground. It looked down to find that its right leg was missing from the knee down, as if something had taken a bite out of it. As the Messenger rolled on the ground, it unintelligibly screamed in agony.

"Pardon me. It seemed like you were going to cause a lot of trouble once you returned, so I decided to immobilize you for the time being."

The Messenger turned around to find Azur in his butler's uniform. After a moment, it recalled that Azur was one of the workers of Dona's manor. "Wh-Wh-What do you... *grah*... think you're doing...!?"

"I can't have you causing a mess like that in my master's domain," Azur said with a straight face, as if he was just stating the night's dinner menu. His eyes were reflectionless, like dark marbles.

“W-Wait! Let me go, and I’ll pay you... Just name the price... Women, jewelry...”

“Not interested.”

A sharp wire wrapped around the Messenger’s neck and suddenly tightened, causing its head to come off with a *pop*. No human or monster could survive decapitation; since some monsters had multiple hearts, Azur had made a habit out of always going for the head.

“There have been a few too many surprises for comfort...” Azur muttered to himself, recalling the incident he had just witnessed. The Madam’s caravan, Luna’s awakening, the clash of the “angel” and devil, the man called Tahara, and worst of all the existence of the Demon Lord. Up against someone like that, Azur considered his assassination skills no more than child’s play.

(That man fears nothing. Not even the gods...) He had called the Tzardom’s angel a “hunk of metal,” and the Goddess of Destiny a whore. Azur had spent many years in the underground, but had never seen anyone like that. He had no other way to describe him than a bona fide Demon Lord. (I must buy time, and secure a location...) Uncharacteristically, Azur wore a sense of anxiety. There was no doubt that such immeasurably powerful darkness would soon extend its reach to Dona’s land. Even with the utmost optimism, Azur struggled to foresee victory in a battle against this Demon Lord.

(I have to get them out, at least...) Azur flashed a concerned expression as he thought of the many children trapped in Dona’s castle. If Azur had been alone, he could simply flee Dona’s castle, even though he would be pursued by Hanzo and her band of ninjas for the rest of his life. Azur had considered escaping with the imprisoned children on more than one occasion. Each time, though, he only saw darkness in their future. No matter where they ran, it would be impossible to keep running from the ninjas. There was the matter of finances, too. If he had to raise what had become a group of 40 kids, no amount of money would be enough. (I may have to rely on an old friend...) Azur considered the possibility with a grim expression, and disappeared into the dark of night.

——Somewhere in Animania.

A woman in her prime was kneeling within a giant cave. A royal partition, in the style of those once used to veil the emperor from his audience in Japan, secluded a portion of the cave, signifying the extreme importance of the figure behind it.

“Great Mother, some human has made it to the edge of our territory,” she said in a beautiful sing-song voice that befitted her appearance. She was none other than the famous Dragonborn, her strength unparalleled. The only being she would ever kneel for was the Dragon itself.

The Dragonborn reported various matters without waiting for a response. The Dragon had a very particular temper, and remained silent for years, decades, even centuries at a time. This was more of a scheduled communication rather than a discussion, as was custom. After finishing her report as usual, the Dragonborn turned to leave when a muffled voice called from behind her. She groveled to the ground, focusing everything she had onto her ears as to not miss any syllable of the divine utterance.

Leave it be.

The short sentence made the Dragonborn shudder with joy. She had only heard the Dragon speak once before. One could only imagine her elation.

Once she stood and left, complete silence was restored in the cave. Some time passed, after which a quiet voice could be heard from beyond the partition.

“So, he has finally decided to show. Let us see how he fares on this retry...”

Memorial: 1999

The King of Fear will descend from the sky.

The world will crumble, and humanity shall fall.

Offer your prayers. Trust your faith. Kneel to the Angel.

Armageddon is knocking at your door.

“Give me a break...” Akira flipped the page on the old magazine in his hand, let out a yawn, and stretched.

The year was 2007, and it was another stupidly peaceful day. There were plenty of things happening in the outside world: an actress in a scandal for an arrogant comment, a boxer accused of cheating, the emergence of one flamboyant celebrity after another, a book about a homeless teenager written by a comedian becoming a bestseller, people starting to live in internet cafes...

“Can’t they give me something more interesting...?” Akira had been coasting through his days working for a video game developer. Day after day, he coded what the client asked for and submitted it. Akira found the work nothing but tedious. He had enough skills to develop video games in multiple genres and had the potential to lead a team of creators, but the thing holding him back was his temperament. “Let’s see... a matching puzzle? Create your own avatar and buy loot boxes for cosmetics? One of these, again...” He grumbled something or the other as he looked through the design documents.

Social networks were all the rage, which made social games played with strangers more popular than ever. Most of these were games where each player created their own avatar and lived in a pre-constructed town where they would simulate day-to-day life, like talking to people, fishing, running a restaurant, farming, et cetera. There were even a few stories of couples meeting in one of these towns and eventually getting married. Of course, the majority of these online romances crumbled after their first IRL date. “What a

peaceful world we live in..." Akira muttered as he looked through the magazines.

Thanks to the 'waste not, want not' policy of the CEO, decades-old magazines were easy to find in his company's reference storage. It was strictly forbidden for the employees to throw anything away that belonged to the company. If they had to replace a single pencil, they had to write up an expense report. Akira found it more ridiculous than frugal.

Buried neck-deep in the references he pulled, Akira powered through his task of upgrading a farm-simulation app. Players would plant, harvest, and sell various crops, which would allow them to purchase livestock, leading to producing milk and eggs. Once the players made enough money, they could purchase heavy machinery like tractors, which would make the harvest more efficient so the players could expand their farms, and—

"If you like farming that much, go tend to a real field! What's the use of making virtual vegetables!? This whole thing's an endless loop, anyway!" Akira rambled on about this and that, all the while typing away.

After some time, he seemed to have finished the task at hand, as he rolled his neck and cracked his shoulders. "The world would have been better off if that Nos-whomever-the-hell was right." Wait as he did, no King of Fear came down from the sky.

"Hm?" The taskbar of his computer flashed, notifying Akira of an incoming call. "XX again...? Like I'm not at work right now." He equipped his headset and grumbled, "get a job, you useless bum."

"Not even a hello!? Where's your decency?"

"Same place where you left yours. It's the middle of a weekday."

"I'm playing your app right now, Akira. I can't get the cows to give me milk."

"Take it up with the cows, not the dev."

"You made the cows too, didn't you? They're your responsibility, you know? You have to take care of them until you send them off to college."

"To cow college? If they're not producing milk, put them on the grill."

Of course, this game had no such thing as a ‘put the cow on the grill’ command. Its virtual town was an endless, kind, and peaceful one, thoroughly cleansed of any impurities. Turning the cows that players worked hard to raise into beef was out of the question. There would be more than a few angry phone calls from players if such a feature were to be implemented. If Akira had been running the app, however, he would have ruthlessly turned any milkless cow and eggless chicken into meat. Even the cow droppings would be useful as fertilizer or even construction material. Before long, the contents of the game would have shifted into players being able to use the money they’d earned to invade the farms of other players. Female players, in particular, would have grown sick of the game in no time.

The worlds that Akira Ono created were so critically departed from what the populace demanded at the time. In a world of Akira’s creation, glory was the solitary prize, so it didn’t shy away from any conflict or contest among the player base. While Akira was talented at developing a dedicated fandom, that in and of itself did not lead to hits. No classics had ever been made without the help of casual players.

“You always get booted when the game’s done, don’t you, Akira?”

“Shut up.” In fact, Akira had always been given a polite excuse and kicked out of the company until they came knocking on his door with another project. Rinse and repeat. Akira couldn’t help but state his honest realization: “They don’t need me around once it’s done.”

Don’t add anything. Don’t make weird features. Only fulfill the client’s request. Times were different from when he was making games on his own dime. Such was the nature of corporate life.

“So what’s after this one?”

“Dress-up-your-avatar 2007...”

“Booring. Ditch that crap. Do the game. *The* game.”

“That thing’s done.” Pain flashed on Akira’s face. He wasn’t in the mood to be reminded of his old game. It forced him to remember the good old days.

“This isn’t you, Akira. Doing work you don’t enjoy.”

“It’s called work cuz you gotta do it, anyway. Not that a jobless bum would understand.”

“Nope, not a clue! I’m going to live my life doing what I love.”

“Have you ever had a job...?” Akira finally asked. He had no idea how XX survived. He would have guessed on the back of their parents, but he had seldom heard XX mention their parents.

“Sure! Putting dandelions on fish!”

“Huh?”

“All these packs of sashimi come flowing down a conveyor belt, and I keep putting dandelions on them, over and over and over and over and over again. Hilarious, right? I got hungry at some point, so I snacked on a few.”

“Is your whole life a joke to you...?” Akira gazed up at the ceiling, defeated by the ridiculous answer. While he didn’t know if there really was such a job out there, he would have walked out on it after the first three minutes. “I got a meeting coming up. See ya.”

“Wait, I’ll tell you the juicy details of my dandelion job.”

“Dandelion my ass. Keep doing that until the world ends.”

“Ew, no thanks. They paid me like 600 yen an hour.”

“That’s it!?” Akira shouted, and hung up. Even though it was nonsensical banter, Akira’s expression had brightened. Somehow, talking with XX made him feel ridiculous for worrying about anything. “It’s not me, huh...? I think you’re right about that.”

The CEO entered the room. “There you are, Ono. Let’s get going.” The CEO would have never tagged along for a meeting if it wasn’t for Akira. He had showed up just to keep the reins on, as he often took things and ran in his own direction. “This project’s worth a lot of money. We can’t let it slip.”

“I figured...” Akira remarked like he had something else to say about it.

The CEO’s brow rose, but he continued as if he didn’t notice. “We’ll be collaborating with different industries and licensing costumes from big-name comics and video games. They’ve told me some big goals for the first year post-

launch. A million users.”

“That’s great.”

By expanding their target audience to women and children, that goal wouldn’t be too unrealistic.

“We get this gig, and it’ll be raining money in here. More room for bonuses,” the CEO hinted. He was struggling to give his hard-to-handle developer a reason to be enthusiastic.

(Raining money, huh...?) Akira gave one last glance at the pile of old magazines as they left the reference storage.

They drove to meet the client and the tedious meeting began. Akira could see a variety of people in the lobby of the hotel where the meeting was to be held. Everyone there was wearing expensive suits, drinking expensive coffee, and talking about expensive things. Fine art, real estate, stocks, foreign investments... None of which a lowly commoner would have any business listening in on.

“We plan to grow this space into a size comparable to MIZI or GREEN,” the client stated.

“I see, I see,” the CEO joyfully agreed. “With a project of this magnitude, I think that’s very achievable.”

Akira glanced through the design document again and let out an internal sigh. (Playing friends, huh...?) The project was to construct an expansive virtual space with emphasis on interacting with other users. Players would create about-me pages, write cheesy introductions for friends, and send blurbs to each other. Akira couldn’t help but gaze up at the ceiling imagining the utterly skin-deep interactions that would take place. A fictional town, a fictional avatar, fictional words, fictional romance, digital clothes, digital crops, digital fish... Those things whirled around in Akira’s mind. Not one of them provided the sense of contest and competition he longed for. There was only one thing he wanted at this moment — a place filled with excitement, one that could scorch his days away, and maybe even his life, at that.

(But how important are costumes, really...?) Many players spent an

astonishing amount on clothes and accessories to dress up their avatars. Akira wondered if it truly meant that much to players to have things most others didn't... That they could show that they were different from everyone else. A good number of players dumped money into microtransactions and shelled out for loot boxes. Some went as far as spending the equivalent of an office worker's average salary, or even many times that, each month.

From this point on, even through the days he considered tedious, Akira learned much about casual players. (I could use this to boost immersion. I could make dedicated costumes for events, special skills, and ways to display achievements...) Before he knew it, Akira was remembering his old game — the one that felt like it had been crushed by the overwhelming trend for social networking applications.

"What do you think, Ono?" the CEO asked. "Does it sound like you can handle that with this deadline?"

His voice seemed distant to Akira, somehow.

"I wanted to get real-life idols involved too."

The client's voice began to fade away.

"What a splendid idea! We'll put their concert costumes into loot boxes..."

Empty words spun around him. Suddenly, Akira stood up and bowed deeply in apology. "I'm terribly sorry. That's not something I can handle with my skill set."

"H-Hey!"

Akira left the hotel lobby, leaving behind the screaming CEO and the dumbfounded client. His brain was now occupied by new features and various systems. He had to solidify them before they vanished into thin air. (It shouldn't have been a complete wipe...) In Akira's world, absolutely everything was wiped and reset every week. Since all the unique accomplishments vanished at the end, it never stuck with casual gamers. Akira realized that he should have let the players carry over things they could use to differentiate themselves. Things they could brag about. Let them dress up to their hearts' content.

"Gotta put this all together... How much PTO do I have left?" Once Akira's brain clicked on, the normal ways of the world couldn't stop him. He would dive

straight down into the depths of his own world.

As Akira walked home with a pep in his step, a bass voice called to him. “You’re tougher to handle than they say, kid.”

“Hm?” Akira turned around to find a muscular, middle-aged man in an expensive suit. However, he wore no tie and his shirt was unbuttoned too low. With a full beard and mustache, he almost seemed like a bandit. “Who are you?”

“You don’t know who I am...? The hell’s Miki been doing?” the man snarled, and lit a cigar. “I’m Aoki. From 42-OMG.” He shoved a business card at Akira. It included the title ‘VP.’

“You’re from Mickity’s...?”

“Gah ha ha! ‘Mickity,’ huh...? That’s a good nickname for that old man.” Aoki laughed with his gut, bellowing out a puff of smoke.

While Akira was a heavy smoker, the stinging smoke of Aoki’s cigar nearly made him gag. “So...? What do you want?” he asked.

“I gave you my card, Kid. You’re still giving me attitude?”

“Sorry, I’m in a hurry. Didn’t mean to be rude. Bye,” Akira said without a shred of sincerity.

Just as he turned to leave, Aoki stopped him in his tracks. “No one else can make the world you’re thinking of?”

“Huh...?”

“I came all the way down here cuz Miki’s being too soft. Like I don’t have better things to do... The hell does our boss want with a kid like you, anyway?”

Akira’s expression hardened. He assumed that Aoki was here to follow up on their offer to run his game as a large-scale MMO. Most might have thought of such an offer from a AAA company like winning the lottery. Still, Akira was adamant. “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t need anyone’s help. I’m not going to—”

“How about the green to pay for it?” Aoki countered, silencing Akira.

He wanted to prove Aoki wrong, but he didn't have nearly as much money as he did before. He had used it all up. No matter how deep he dug, he would never find enough money to develop a large-scale video game.

"That's why I'm calling you 'kid.' You think you can get everything handed to you just for a few good ideas?"

"What's your problem? Then why don't you... Wha!?" Akira was cut short by a loud explosion. The ground shook too suddenly for him to stay standing.

"Woah woah woah... What the hell!?" Aoki shouted and fell back on his behind.

Akira first assumed that there was an earthquake, but he was wrong. When he turned around, he found various parts of the hotel he had just come out of engulfed in flames.

"A fire...? Or some kind of gas explosion!?" Aoki muttered to himself, staring blankly at the hotel.

Akira, however, was seeing something completely different. He saw a giant, sinister monster with three heads in the raging flame and black smoke erupting from the hotel. It looked just like the monster Cerberus that he had often seen in anime and comics.

"Hey, Kid! Call an ambula— agh!" A chain of explosions turned the once-extravagant hotel to rubble. The screaming and fleeing people played out in slow motion in Akira's eyes. "That thing's done for...! We gotta get out of here, Kid! Hey, you hear me!?" Aoki frantically called as the hotel crumbled to the ground.

For some reason, a shuddering block of text emerged in Akira's mind.

—1999—

It's not that the King of Fear never descended from the sky.

It had arrived way ahead of schedule.

This document is Classified under the authority of The Empire

Creation of Devils

Succeeded at planting the heart of a devil into ordinary citizens. No adverse effects to physical capabilities. Subjects display sudden and dramatic changes like Jekyll and Hyde. Experiment with caution.

Creation of Vampires

Able to recreate immortality in a limited capacity. Requires blood in massive quantities. The members of the Elder Council have repeatedly requested expedited research.

If those bags could drop dead really soon, that'd be great. Please.

Creation of a Reaper

Narrowed down the initial worldwide candidate pool of 20,000 through experimentation and testing. 68 subjects have survived. We will move on to selecting the final one.

P.S. Dear Mister Secretary, from Saegusa

I just bought some NINE merch!

A hat *and* a body pillow!

I would love to see you over at the lab sometime.

Postscript

Kurone Kanzaki, the author, here. Thank you so much for picking up volume 4. I know it took SO long, but I'm so relieved to be able to bring you a new chapter in the story. Jeez, did that take a long time. No one's read this new chapter anywhere else, so I'm a little anxious to hear what you think of it.

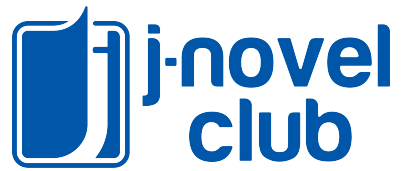
Life has been pretty crazy for me while I was working on this volume. What with the anime, the collabs with Avabel Online, Altair's Chronicles, Go Go Curry, and a stamp rally...

This will be a summer I will never forget, for sure. On another note, I've always thought of summer as a fun, yet bittersweet season. The first thing that always comes to my mind when I hear 'summer' are the memories of summer vacation in grade school. That indescribable sense of freedom, the dreading of homework, the neighborhood festivals, catching bugs on hikes, family camping trips, watching fireworks, chilling watermelon in the well, the morning exercise routine on the radio... You would think that penniless grade-schoolers shouldn't have been able to have that much fun, but all of those scenes seem so bright in my memory. The thought crosses my mind that, even if I did those same activities now, it just wouldn't be the same. Seasons and moments that pass never return to us. But this particular summer, however, will always shimmer brightly in my mind. Even when I'm an old geezer. I can only hope that when you remember this first summer of the Reiwa era, you'll find this story somewhere in your memory.

I think I've rambled long enough. See you at the end of volume 5!

By the time this volume comes out, I believe the anime should be wrapping up too. We hope you'll enjoy both mediums to the end.





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Demon Lord, Retry! Volume 4

by Kurone Kanzaki

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